

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF READING

An investigation into the perceptions of reading by underachieving
year five and six students in a low decile New Zealand primary school.

He taonga te mokapuna, he taonga ano ona whakarro
Our mokapuna are treasures so too are their thoughts.

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To my father

Arthur Davis

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Abstract

Numerous educational researchers have stressed the importance of children learning to read. Achieving well in the New Zealand educational system depends on a range of factors that are closely linked to the ability to read effectively. Research has found that children who experience difficulties in learning to read in the first years of schooling often face failure throughout their school years and in adulthood. This in turn can restrict job opportunities and make it more difficult to participate or benefit economically in society.

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of reading by underachieving Year five and six students in a low decile New Zealand Primary School. The study sought to understand what supports or barriers these students' encountered in their acquisition of reading skills and how their views may inform current school and home practices for more effective literacy learning. The data gathered was shared with one of the participant's parents.

Little has yet been reported on this topic from the point of view of the learner. This study was designed to hear their views and to see what they saw as important in learning to read. The researcher used semi-structured focus group interviews to determine the children's perceptions about how they learned to read.

Learning to read is complex and a child's understanding of how they learn to read is also multifaceted. The study concluded that children viewed their parents or whanau as very influential in their achievement in learning to read. The views expressed by the children and the parents reinforced the importance of the home environment's relationship with the school. Parents play an integral in the fostering of children's literacy development. It is important that parents are aware of the critical role they play in their child's education because

as the study found children learn to read more effectively with the support of their whanau.

Teachers also play a vital role in recognising the importance of reading and preparing all students no matter what their proficiency for literacy learning. It is the day to day work of educators that ensures the majority of children will learn to read. The participants in this study did not appear to understand that they were working below their expected levels in reading. They were aware of some of the factors that were necessary in learning to read but these had not been explicit. Teachers need to share this information with students. Students need to be taught the skills and explicit strategies that allow and encourage them to persevere, succeed and take control of their own learning to read.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Reading is essential to success at school. If students cannot read at their age appropriate level they are unable to keep pace with the curriculum and almost always leave with poor school qualifications. This can result in limited career choice and may perpetuate the poverty cycle. Current studies suggest that our literacy practices are effective for most students but others experience ongoing difficulties in acquiring more complex skills in literacy throughout their school years (Ministry of Education, 2000a). This latter group of children are not arbitrarily distributed through society but according to Adams & Ryan, (2002) there are significant differences in early reading achievement between particular groups of young children and these differences remain throughout their school lives. Wylie, (2002) suggests that children from low income families start school with significantly lower levels of pre-reading skills than children from middle and higher income families. In New Zealand, Maori and Pacific Islands families are over represented in the lower income group. McNaughton, (2002) reminds us that these differences in reading are still evident after several years of instruction.

Education is not a level playing field and the experiences children have before they start school play an important part in their reading progress (Alton –Lee 2003; Flockton & Crooks 2001). Formal reading instruction begins at a younger age in New Zealand when compared to Australia and many states in the United States of America. New Zealand children begin schooling on the day they turn five. Legally they do not have to attend until they are six years old but over 95 percent of children begin school when they turn five (1994). School starting age can be a contentious issue but according to Dockett & Perry, (2007) what happens at school is more important than the age the child starts school. Some students are ready to begin reading when they arrive at school. These children have often been immersed in a stimulating environment where they have been talked to, read to and they have acquired a wide vocabulary and an insight into the basics of print. Bourdieu, (1990) explains that often children from such homes bring ‘cultural capital’ of the predominant group and move easily within society and their children occupy a privileged position in social

institutions such as schools. Other children arrive with more limited experiences where there has been modest or no exposure to books and their oral language may have been restricted (McLachlan-Smith & Shuker, 2002). Those children who come from homes where language is used almost exclusively for direct communication such as commands (Juel, 1988), may have difficulties with the decontextualised nature of books and school. Other factors that may also affect children's literacy development are parental attitudes, their exposure to print, stories, rhyme, rhythm, music and drama, their own interests, the quality of books they are read and how well they can hear (Adams & Ryan, 2002). Wylie, (2002) reports that early childhood education centres can play a significant part in children's use of language and experiences with print and letters.

Reading in New Zealand is considered successful for most students. Gilmore, Lovett, & van Hasselt, (2003) in their PROBE findings, of the NEMP study of Year 4 and Year 8 students found that 80 percent of these pupils had the technical skills to read at or above levels regarded as normal for their time at school. When New Zealand is compared to other countries internationally (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004) our mean reading achievement (529) is significantly higher than the international mean of (500) but significantly lower than that of 11 other countries including Sweden, England and the United States of America.

For some groups of students in New Zealand, conventional literacy practices in our schools have had their limitations (Ministry of Education 2006). Students who experience difficulty learning to read in primary grades often continue with reading difficulties throughout their whole schooling (Pressley, 2002). As they get older this deficit in achievement can affect opportunities for learning across all curriculum areas and their future in society (Alton-Lee, 2003; Education Review Office, 2000). In New Zealand there are groups of students who make relatively low progress in developing literacy. These are mainly Maori children and children from Pacific Islands immigrant families, particularly those in schools serving communities with the highest unemployment and lowest income levels (McNaughton, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2005b). At entry to school when literacy and language skills usually associated with success at school are measured, there are already differences between these groups of

children and other groups. The differences can become more noticeable after four years of schooling (McNaughton, 2002).

Failure to learn to read will sometimes be the trigger for inappropriate behaviours within the school setting to divert attention from their perceived inadequacies (Chapman & Tunmer, 2002). A learning problem may manifest itself as a behaviour problem. For most students, reading problems are preventable if they receive effective classroom instruction that is tailored to meet their needs and interests (Clay, 1998). At times students who are having difficulty with learning to read will be selected for more intensive tuition either within the classroom or withdrawn to work with a teacher or teacher aide to address these problems. Many of these programmes have proved very successful for students who are experiencing difficulties in learning to read. A study conducted by Fitzgerald, (2004) provides evidence that minimally trained college student volunteers can help at-risk readers to improve their reading achievement. However it has been suggested by McDowall, Boyd, Hodgen, & van Viet, (2005) that not all programmes are monitored for their effectiveness. In the researcher's experiences as a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour this lack of monitoring is a concern as at times there is the expectation that teacher aides who sometimes have very little experience and training should work with students who have the most serious learning problems. The Education Review Office identified withdrawal programmes in the school chosen by the researcher as an area for improvement. There is currently no system in place to ensure that classroom teachers are aware of the learning that is taking place within these withdrawal programmes, or that the teachers have input into these interventions.

A trend in education has been the use of pupil voice data in school improvement and effectiveness (Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). Schools are involving pupils in school life through such activities as peer tutoring, peer mediation and student councils therefore it seems appropriate to consider their views when it involves their learning. To improve our teaching of reading it may be useful to examine our practice from the students' perspectives. Gollop, (2000) states that when we are seeking information from students, this information should be obtained directly from the students themselves. We need to find out whether the reading programmes we are putting in place are effective. Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, (2000) believe there is a role for

educational research to include students in decisions regarding their learning and valuing their views and opinions. This idea is supported by Williams, (2001) who believes that by allowing students a voice, valuable information can be provided to teachers regarding the effectiveness of their teaching. By giving students a right to be heard Carr, (2000) suggests that there is a bridging of the child-adult gap to construct a mutual understanding between adults and children in the place of learning. A conflicting view held by some may involve thinking about children and childhood as a preparation for adulthood and as such children may be seen as possessions. Parents and schools acting 'in locus parentis' roles may believe that they know what is best for children therefore their thoughts and considerations may not to be heard.

Smith, Taylor & Gollop, (2000) believe that as students are not passive recipients of the teaching process, they need to be actively involved in their learning and their voices need to be heard. By looking at teaching through the eyes of individual students and carrying out detailed analysis of students' self talk and private talk Nuthall, (2007) revealed that students' engage in an ongoing process of making sense of classroom activities to construct their own interpretations of them. In the co-constructive model of teaching and learning, as discussed by Askew & Lodge, (2000), there needs to be a shift to a more collaborative model which allows students to identify issues that affect their learning and wellbeing, and that these are acted upon to bring about changes.

This investigation focuses on low achieving students' perceptions of reading and the supports or barriers they have faced in learning to read. Listening and evaluating their perceptions may provide us with information that will help in the promotion and enhancement of current literacy programmes in their current school. The researcher in this study has worked as a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (Ministry of Education, 2007) for the past eight years. This experience has convinced the researcher that there is a need to seek information from students who have difficulty learning to read in order to discover their perceptions or ideas about how they learned to read. The insights the students' and the parents provide may be useful to reinforce the practices and strategies promulgated by (McNaughton, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2003b, 2006; Spear-Swerling, 2004; Tunmer & Chapman, 2002a), which

have been found to be beneficial in alleviating problems students face in learning to read.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

In order to meet the aims of the study a sound understanding of the various issues surrounding reading pedagogy was essential. These issues included the importance of children's experiences before attending school. These experiences appear critical to student's development and achievement (Alton -Lee, 2003; Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Juel, 1988; Pressley, 2002; Wylie, 2002). It was important to look at what occurred when students learned to read, the effectiveness of the teacher in the school situation and the significance of a classroom environment that is inclusive of all students and conducive to good learning. Current research in New Zealand, Australia and the United States of America was reviewed to look at the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Included in the literature, focusing on diverse backgrounds were issues related to Maori students in New Zealand, and the role families and whanau play in their students' learning. What happens in family and whanau environments and the home school partnerships that are developed were deemed to be extremely important in determining what and how children read. Studies related to the validity of the learner's voice were explored so that the semi-structured focus group interviews were designed to accommodate students within a supportive non-threatening environment. The literature review is presented in the discussions below and summarised at the end of the chapter.

Learning to read

Most commentators believe that the development of literacy happens a long time before children enter school. In fact children begin to communicate the moment they are born and this continues throughout their lifetime. A parent plays a crucial role in supporting their child to learn to read, through the provision of an effective home literacy environment. This involves parents providing regular, planned interactive literacy activities practices and opportunities (Jackson & Adams 2002). A child's pathways into literacy begins in early childhood and continue throughout their life as they encounter ever-widening social contexts for literacy practices (Martello, 2002).

While many children reach common literacy goals in early childhood, their pathways are as diverse as the literacy practices of individual families and the communities and cultures they live in (Makin & Diaz, 2002). Many opportunities for events in the life of preschoolers have implications for literacy development. These include games, play activities, outings, interactions during meals, reading, drawing and many others. These activities stimulate the development of a child's language which is critical for subsequent development of reading and writing skills (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). Evidence from (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003) demonstrates that children's early years (i.e. zero to five years) are critical to their development and achievement and can have lasting effects. "Parents" (these include a range of family situations) are viewed as being critically important in supporting their child's reading progress. The home environment forms an integral part of the partnership between parents and early childhood centres and schools in fostering beginning reading (Jackson & Adams, 2002). The participation in quality early childhood education has shown to have significant and ongoing impact on a child's achievement even when the child has reached the age of fourteen (Wylie, 2004). Parents are widely considered to be the child's first teacher and a wide body of research into successful reading acquisition now acknowledges the critical influence of this role (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Makin & Diaz, 2002; Pressley, 2002; Wylie, 2002). Parents can draw their children's attention to "environmental print" such as road signs and special offers on cereal packets. They can talk about alphabet letters and labels on favourite foods in the supermarket, and print based activities such as magnetic letters, poems and nursery rhymes. The importance of oral language in a child's early reading acquisition is not always fully recognised by parents and educators (Wylie, 2002). Without a rich language background children may struggle to learn to read.

In most New Zealand schools, literacy instruction begins when students start school, normally at five years of age. Reading progress is indicated by the satisfactory reading of text at an increasing level of difficulty. Children progress at different rates depending on their pre-school experiences and the types of instructional programmes they have been involved in at preschool. Family circumstances and socio economic status can have a bearing on students' educational outcomes and can influence future occupational aspirations and commitment to learning (PISA., 2004). Two findings from the 'Competent Children' project (Wylie, 2002) that are particularly relevant to

reading achievement include family income and maternal education as these factors often relate to the kinds of experiences available to children.

Difficulties in students learning to read in the first years of schooling often lead to failure throughout their school years (Pressley, 1996) and in adulthood (Bruck, 1992). Data from the 'Competent Children' project (Wylie, 2002) show that low scores at age six continued at age ten and that the first three years at school are crucial for children's reading providing a window of opportunity that narrows over time. For beginning readers who have difficulty detecting phonological sequences in words, progress in reading may be impeded. Stanovich, (1986) maintained that children making low progress in reading, fall further and further behind their peers and that remediation of literacy difficulties become more challenging after three years at school. Unrewarding early reading experiences for these readers can lead to less involvement in reading practices and may trigger negative Matthew (poor-get-poorer) (Stanovich, 1986) effects in reading. Smith & Elley, (1997) believe the process of learning to read is largely the same for all students no matter where it happens. They claim that what does differ is the society the students live in, the school systems they pass through, the symbols they attend to and the teaching they have gone through to employ these processes.

In many different educational systems, children from cultural and linguistic minority groups, who live in school communities with limited access to the resources of the mainstream communities, often achieve less well in literacy than other children. In New Zealand this is also true, especially in low decile schools. These schools, by definition serve children in communities and families with very limited resources and the majority of these children are Maori and Pacific Island children. Public concern in New Zealand about reading and the gaps that had been identified in literacy achievement associated with ethnicity and the type of school led to government initiatives such as the Literacy Taskforce (1999), the National Literacy Strategy reforms and the Education and Science Select Committee report on Reading (2001). They have helped to focus attention on reading and how best to help children learn to read. They have signalled a stronger emphasis on decoding strategies in current literacy classrooms and the need for explicit teaching across a range of literacy

processes. There was also the acknowledgement of the critical role that parents and early childhood education play in children's literacy development.

Dimensions of successful literacy teaching practice, as described by the (Ministry of Education, 2002) are aimed at raising student achievement in New Zealand primary schools. The New Zealand school system uses some teaching methods that are prevalent throughout our primary and intermediate school systems. These instructional strategies, as defined by the Ministry of Education, (2006) are deliberate acts of teaching that focus learning in order to meet a particular purpose. These strategies include approaches such as, reading to students, guided reading, shared reading, independent reading and other contexts such as reciprocal reading. Children are seen as active participants in the learning process, not passive recipients that need to be 'taught' by expert others.

Sociocultural and Social Constructivist Theories

Effective literacy practice in New Zealand draws on sociocultural and social constructivist theories. Socio systems in this context refer to any shared practices and meanings within a group, and culture refers to any group with shared understandings and is not defined by race, ethnicity or cultural boundaries (Goncu & Katsarou, 2000) cited in (Cullen, 2002). Social-constructivist theories highlight how learning is socially constructed through interactions with others.

Sociocultural theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasises the roles of social, cultural, and historical factors in human experience. Social constructivism stresses the importance of learning about literacy through participation in authentic meaningful experiences and highlights the importance of learning that is socially constructed through interactions with others, rather than through individualised cognitive thinking processes (Cullen, 2002; Tracey & Morrow, 2006). The core concepts associated with the understanding of sociocultural systems of learning include the 'zone of proximal development', scaffolding, the co-construction of learning, funds of knowledge, cultural tools and artefacts, literacy apprenticeships and guided participation.

The concept of the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) draws on Vygotsky, (1978) theory which describes the zone between the level at which a child can work

unassisted and the level at which he or she can function with assistance. Associated with ZPD is the concept of scaffolding adopted by Wood, Bruner & Ross (1976) cited in (Cullen, 2002) which describes tutorial like assistance that teachers can use to promote children's literacy learning. The co-construction of learning focuses on situations in which children can learn as they participate with others in social and cultural routines. Social-constructivism suggests new ways of considering families influence on early literacy. Moll, (2000) cited in (Cullen, 2002) uses the term 'funds of knowledge' to refer to bodies of knowledge that underlie family life and events within a community. McNaughton, (1995) maintains that a family's literacy practices provide a framework of social and cultural meanings in which specific forms of literacy are embedded. Teachers are able to modify teaching practices to build directly upon the diverse range of knowledge and practices found in the homes. Another way of thinking about diversity is to apply Vygotsky, (1978) idea of 'cultural tools' to literacy learning. Cultural tools or artefacts refer to resources and systems within any particular social or cultural group. Recognition by teachers of the diverse systems and tools in different social and cultural settings highlights the multiple forms of literacy experienced by young children in their early years.

The social-constructivist view on literacy learning described by Rogoff (1995,1980) cited in (Cullen, 2002) acknowledges three levels of learning: personal, interpersonal and community. At the personal level the child is learning new skills through participation in activities, whereas interpersonal learning occurs in guided participation situations where another who is more skilled guides participation. This may involve 'hands on' activities or may involve nonverbal processes where the child watches. At the community level of learning, participation involves literacy activities that form part of the teaching curricula or goals.

This social-constructivist perspective enables students' to progress towards fluency and independence, and the socialisation model enables students' to construct meaning within social settings and recognises the fact that they take very different pathways in their development (Clay, 1998).

Effective Teaching

Alton-Lee, (2003) in her extensive analysis of what constitutes good practice in teaching suggests that teachers make more difference to students' achievement levels than any other factors including students' backgrounds or school resources. The evidence reveals that up to 59 per cent variance in student performance is attributable to differences between teachers and classes rather than differences in schools. This variance is supported by Hattie, (1992) in his synthesis of 180,000 studies of the effects on student achievement which states that teachers were deemed as the greatest source that can make a difference to student learning. Phillips, McNaughton & MacDonald, (2002) have demonstrated that improved teacher knowledge and professional practice in literacy instruction can address the needs for early and accelerated learning for students from low decile schools. They have shown that these students can keep up with their peers in age appropriate skills.

Effective teachers care about students and student achievement. Their teaching begins with the belief that all students can learn and achieve and that teachers can make a difference for all students (Alton-Lee, 2003; Ministry of Education, 2005a, 2005b). Keith, (2002) in his summary of *Picking up the Pace*, (Phillips, McNaughton, & MacDonald, 2002) states that effective teachers have expectations that children can achieve academic progress and believe that they can be effective in helping them to do this. They believe children can obtain independence in reading and they continually look for opportunities to move them up a gradient of difficulty with appropriate support. A recent study by Rubie, (2004) identified six teachers who had high expectations for their students and three teachers whose expectations were low for the students in their classes. This study showed large differences in academic progress of students in reading depending on whether they were placed with high or low expectation teachers. Those in classes with high expectation teachers made considerable gains while those with low expectations did not.

Assessment is an integral part of the learning process. Assessment information provides feedback to improve teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Clarke, 2001; Timperley & Parr, 2004). Teachers have a professional responsibility to gather assessment information and both teachers and students have a responsibility to ensure that it does provide a dependable picture of the standard of learning at the time of data

collection (Absolum, 2006). Whatever process or tool is used to gather information, it should relate to the purposes for which it is to be used. It has been suggested by Timperley and Parr, (2004) that often assessments are undertaken for reasons that bear little direct relationship to what happens in the classroom such as reporting or compliance to some external requirement. Black & Wiliam, (1998) suggest that students should be involved in their learning. The more that students know about what it is they are supposed to learn and the more feedback they receive about their progress, the more likely they are to achieve well. The results of reading assessments should be explained to the students, mainly in terms of what they can do that they couldn't do before, and summative information about progress in terms of reading age or level.

The Classroom Environment

Classroom management is an essential skill for effective learning. Teachers enhance the classroom climate by establishing procedures and routines that promote positive feelings about school. How children behave, how much effort they put into their schoolwork and how much they enjoy school are directly related to the issue of classroom control (Henley, 2006). It has been identified by Marzano & Marzano, (2003) that a safe and orderly classroom is a prerequisite for academic achievement. The way classrooms are organised and managed are fundamental to students achieving success in reading and can have a significant influence on students' acquisition of skills (Absolum, 2006; Brophy, 1983; Ministry of Education, 2000b). Positive classroom environments have been associated with academic achievement (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994) and improved schooling for at risk students (Pianta & Walsh, 1996).

A strong research base supports the idea that students learn best in nurturing environments where they feel accepted, valued and trusted by their teachers (Pierce, 1994). McNaughton, (2002) suggests that children from diverse cultural and language backgrounds need to be aware of the fabric of the classroom so that they understand the goals and expectations of activities and what is required to perform them. It has been reported by Walberg and Greenburg, (1997) that trusting relationships among students and teachers positively influence students' attitudes, productivity and achievement.

Research by Ruddell & Unrau, (2004a) has attempted to explain the sociocognitive model of the reading process as it occurs in the classroom context involving the reader, text and teacher. The reader's attitude is reflected in the student's previous experiences, beliefs and knowledge (Mathewson, 2004). This consists of two major interrelated parts; affective conditions which relate to the student's motivation to read and their personal sociocultural values regarding reading and cognitive conditions of reading such as background knowledge of language, word analysis skills, processing text and an understanding of classroom climate. The teacher creates an instructional learning environment where students are involved in a collaborative process of inquiry and self-improvement. The teacher's prior knowledge and beliefs also consist of affective and cognitive conditions based on and shaped by a wide range of life experiences (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004b). These beliefs strongly influence the instructional decision making process, the reader's motivation, reading strategies used, and the evaluation of student learning. The learning environment described by Langer, (2004) also has a powerful influence on a student's motivation to engage in the learning process. Smith & Elley, (1994) remind us that students learn best when they are operating at their appropriate level of difficulty which is where they can achieve success with some adult guidance. This zone of proximal development as described by Vygotsky, (1978) is achieved in reading instruction by teachers who are able to assess the level of difficulty of texts their students are exposed to and what the students are capable of achieving with help.

Several critics of this current approach, (Nicholson, 1997; Tunmer & Chapman, 2002b) believe that greater emphasis should be paid to the development of phonological processing skills and recoding strategies than is happening in our early literacy programmes. This view assumes that the reading act involves lower level or perceptual processes to do with letters and sounds which precedes the higher level (meaning) processes. Smith & Elley, (1997) believe that proponents of this view tend to promote the deliberate teaching of letters sounds and blends to children using flashcards drills and brief artificial texts until children have automatised the decoding process and become reasonably fluent at reading aloud.

Student Motivation

Reading research has explored the complexities and multidimensional nature of reading. The LaBerge-Samuels, (1974) model cited in Samuels, (2004) describes the automatic information processing in reading that attracted the attention of teachers and researchers because it used the idea of automaticity to explain why fluent readers were able to decode and understand text while other readers had difficulty. This model attempted to identify components in the information processing system and identified student attention to be the key element. Attention as explained by Samuels, (2004) has two components, internal and external. External aspects of attention are more obvious and observable but internal aspects are even more crucial but more difficult to describe. Central to this theory is that printed words must first be decoded then comprehended. Samuels, (2004) believes that for many students, learning to read is a difficult process as the readers have limited quantities of attention and for beginning readers when their attention is mainly directed towards decoding this then interferes with their comprehension.

Positive early reading experiences are important in developing children's attitudes and fostering their self perceptions about reading. Fields & Spangler, (2000) argue that attitudes towards reading can begin in infancy and can be enhanced throughout childhood. It is important for students to achieve early success in learning to read as the effects of reading failure may generalise beyond the immediate reading environment and may affect students' motivation to learn. Research by Ziegert, Kistner, Castro, & Robertson, (2001) replicated and extended Cain & Dweck, (1995) findings regarding children's responses to challenging achievement situations. Their findings supported the idea that individual differences in achievement based helplessness emerge in children as young as five or six years of age. These motivational patterns exhibited by young children are somewhat stable and predictive of responses in later elementary school years.

Students from Diverse Backgrounds

Alton- Lee, (2003) has identified that some groups of students, many from diverse backgrounds, have not been well served by the conventional literacy practices in our schools. Maori children, and children from Pacific Island Immigrant families, who

attend schools serving communities within the country's highest unemployment and low income levels make relatively low progress in developing literacy skills. Differences in attainment have been attributed both to the quality and appropriateness of the teaching and to specific experiences in the home that influence literacy achievement (Phillips, McNaughton, & MacDonald, 2002). The NEMP (National Education Monitoring Project), (Flockton & Crooks, 2005) indicated that there is a significant number of children who read below expectation. This is supported by data on the numbers of six year olds who are receiving Reading Recovery programmes. According to Kerslake, (2000) this figure has ranged from 20 -25 per cent of all six year olds since 1991.

Clay, (1998) emphasised that a child's pathway to literacy is exceedingly diverse. From a sociocultural perspective this recognises the interplay between social and cultural beliefs and what counts as literacy practice within the home and wider community. Studies in Australia have shown where there is a mismatch between home and school literacy experiences children can experience problems and even failure with school literacy (Freebody, Ludwig, & Gunn, 1995). The goal for students from diverse backgrounds and with all students is to promote ownership of literacy (Au, 2002). Ownership has to do with valuing literacy, having a positive attitude towards literacy and having the habit of using literacy. Children who have difficulty with decoding can be taught successful reading strategies from an early focus on associating letters and sounds to sharpened listening skills and alphabet knowledge (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004a). A longitudinal research project by Tunmer, Chapman, Ryan & Prochnow, (1998) examined what strategies and resources were useful for helping children with reading difficulties in New Zealand schools. Their findings indicate that knowledge of spelling to sound patterns is necessary for students learning to recognise new words and the development of phonological processing skills is very important for all students at the new entrant level. This is in contrast with whole language philosophy to literacy education which emphasises the natural development of literacy competence. Immersion in real literature and daily writing is favoured over explicit teaching of basic reading skills. To counteract both these arguments it has been suggested by Pressley, (2002) that what is good in whole language should be combined with more explicit instruction of decoding and comprehension.

Flockton & Crooks, (2004) state that skilfulness in reading requires an ability to recognise or decode written words together with an ability to understand and interpret what is said or intended by the writer. In reading, efficient decoding is not sufficient, readers have to construct meaning and think critically about the text. Some students are proficient at decoding but comprehension is limited because students are not able to make links with their knowledge of the world. According to Anderson, (2004) a reader is able to comprehend a message when he/she is able to bring to mind a schema that gives a good account of the objects and events described in the message.

Maori

Maori students make up around 20 per cent of the total population of school aged children in Aotearoa, New Zealand (Hohepa & McNaughton, 2002). They attend several different forms of schooling. A small proportion, around three per cent attend Kura Kaupapa Maori, language schools (Hohepa & McNaughton, 2002). These schools are designed by Maori for Maori, to uphold Maori values and beliefs where the curriculum is delivered in Maori language (Hohepa & McNaughton, 2002). English literacy instruction is generally, but not always, introduced when students have had four to six years of schooling.

In addition to Kura Kaupapa Maori, there are other Maori medium programmes operating within general schools in which students are taught most of the curriculum subjects in Maori language. Nearly one in five Maori students is now in some form of Maori medium education, and over half of whom are in classroom environments of over 50 per cent Maori language. However the majority of Maori students are in classrooms where literacy instruction is in English (Hohepa & McNaughton, 2002).

In many countries, children from cultural and linguistic minority groups who live in school communities with limited access to the resources of the mainstream communities achieve less well in literacy instruction than other children (Snow, Burns, & Griffen, 1998). This is sometimes true of Maori students who are often in communities with limited resources. Maori or children from cultural and linguistic minority groups achieve significantly lower levels on reading and writing tasks than children in other schools (Flockton & Crooks, 2001; McNaughton, 2002; Ministry of Education, 1999, 2000b; J. Smith & Elley, 1994). Differences are evident on entry to

school on conventional English school literacy measures such as concepts about print and story telling. Other studies show differences in measures of alphabet knowledge and writing vocabulary; although when family literacy activities are described it is apparent that children's pre-school environments contain rich literacy experiences, albeit not necessarily well-matched with school activities (M. J. Adams & Bruck, 1993; Juel, 1988; McNaughton, 1995; Pressley, 2002).

Generally Maori students, like other children, make rapid advances in knowledge of component items like letter identification and phonological knowledge. However disparities on more general measures of English text reading and writing tend to increase as the child gets older (McNaughton, 2002). After four years of instruction substantial significant differences in achievement are apparent between Maori and other children especially in those lower socio-economic communities (Ministry of Education, 1999; Phillips, McNaughton, & MacDonald, 2002).

The contemporary patterns of literacy development and achievement in the early years for Maori students raises questions about effective literacy instruction. A common theory in educational approaches is that instruction would be more effective if it increased the continuity of match between family literacy practices and school based literacy (Alton -Lee, 2003; Cazden, 1988; McNaughton, 2002). While there is often a mismatch between literacy activities at home and school for most families, for indigenous families this is more pronounced (McNaughton, 2002). Educators may need to consider how literacy practices can be introduced in ways that identify, emphasise and articulate preferred values, beliefs and practices of the culture in which targeted families belong. Creating greater continuity between family and school settings is an important principle whether the settings are general or radical alternatives (Hohepa & McNaughton, 2002). The challenge facing educators is to have strategies that enable effective collaboration to share both professional and family knowledge.

Teacher expectations can be defined as inferences about their students' future behaviour or achievement based on the teachers' current knowledge of these students, including knowledge gained from assessment (Ministry of Education, 2006). These expectations should also be informed by their knowledge of students' expected patterns of progress in literacy development. Teacher expectations are influenced by

their personal beliefs and values (Ministry of Education, 2006). The impact of expectations is especially significant for students from culturally and linguistic backgrounds that differ from the majority school culture. The challenge for many teachers is to move away from associating difference with deficit (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003). Research evidence about what happens in New Zealand schools has shown that teachers and other staff tend to have lower expectations for certain identified groups of students particularly Maori and Pasifika students in low decile schools. Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, (2003) feel that the deficit theorising by teachers is the major impediment to Maori students educational achievement for it results in teachers having low expectations for Maori students which in turn creates a downward spiralling, self fulfilling prophecy of Maori student achievement and failure. Alton-Lee, (2003) has further suggested that research over the past two decades has revealed that mainstream teachers in New Zealand not only hold inappropriately low expectations for, but make inappropriate assessments of and/or provide lower levels of praise for Maori students in English medium New Zealand classrooms. Raising teacher expectations as described by Bishop, Berryman et al., (2003) can be a critical factor in breaking the pattern of low achievement in terms of both the learning that students are capable of and the pace in which they can progress.

Home School Partnerships

Building strong home school partnerships has shown to be effective in supporting students' learning. Effective home school partnerships can strengthen supports for children's learning in both home and school settings and when they work, the magnitude of the positive impacts on children can be substantial compared to traditional institutionally-based interventions (Alton -Lee, 2003; Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Wylie, 2002). Children's learning is nurtured by families and whanau who have appropriately high expectations for the ongoing learning of their children. The Ministry of Education school strategy document (2005a) suggests that families and whanau want their children to succeed and most are prepared to help in any way they can. They are best able to do this when they have useful information and support from schools to help their children's learning and development. Partnerships between home and schools and between schools and the community are more likely to

be effective when they are based on shared expectations from whanau and teachers that the student will succeed as a learner (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003). These expectations need to be appropriate and shared *kanohi-ki-te kanohi* (face to face) so that shared goals can be developed. It has been suggested that schools and teachers are powerful agents in deciding and guiding family input (Ministry of Education, 2006). Teachers have a role in clarifying and sharing the expectations that they have set for their students' learning and communicating these to families and whanau. Absolum, (2006) suggests that building a partnership with the whanau is about building a sound trusting relationship amongst the teacher, the student and the student's family. Well informed parents are key partners in any programme but especially so when an intervention programme is being planned.

Schools and teachers sometimes underestimate the level of parents or caregivers commitment to their child's education. This may be because parents of older students are often less visible in the school than when their children were younger or it may be that parents assume that the literacy activities that are carried out at home are not relevant to school and they themselves cannot contribute to their child's literacy learning. Wylie, (1999) declares that although parental connections with their children's teachers are critically important to children's achievement and well being, there has been a pattern of decreased parental involvement in New Zealand's primary education nationally over the past decade. For example parent help in classrooms has decreased from 21 per cent down to 11 per cent and informal discussion at functions or trips has decreased from 51 per cent to 26 per cent. Wylie, (1999) has pointed out that these trends may reflect the busier lives of parents and teachers, particularly if parents are engaged in paid employment.

An important area of home school contact is parental discussions regarding their child's school report. These meetings have been shown to vary according to the decile level of the school. These discussions provide opportunities for important information to be shared including strategies which can help children's learning. Wylie's, (1999) data showed that whereas 72 per cent of decile 5-10 schools were likely to get three quarters or more of their parents engaged in discussions of children's reports with their teachers, only 38 per cent of decile 1-2 schools were likely to have this level of parental engagement in the reporting process. This difference reported by Wylie,

(1999) is of particular concern in the New Zealand context and indicates that children and parents of low decile schools are further disadvantaged by lower levels of contact.

Seeking Students' Perspectives

Smith Taylor & Gollop, (2000) stress that students are often seen as passive recipients rather than active participants who can offer their own perceptions of their learning and can direct educators towards providing better conditions for their schooling. For students experiencing difficulties in learning to read there are no simple explanations or causes, neither is there any easy solution or answer to relieve problems experienced by learners. There appears to be limited information from low achieving students about their perceptions of reading, and programmes that have been affective in alleviating their problems associated with reading learning difficulties. According to Flockton & Crooks, (2005) students reported that they did not get specific feedback on what they were good at in reading and what they needed to do to improve. Ecological and sociocultural theory suggests that looking at the world from children's perspectives is helpful and necessary. Smith, (1998) argues that educators have much to learn from listening to children's voices. She suggests that children are capable of understanding complex issues and seeking their understanding about their learning and understanding could help researchers find out more about how students experience their everyday lives.

Conclusion

Several themes of importance to the current study have emerged through the review of the literature. The review has clearly established the importance of a child's pre-school experiences before attending school. What happens in childrens' homes and communities shape their early literacy learning. They acquire language subconsciously through demonstrations and engagement in literacy practices in their homes. Early literacy experiences can be extremely diverse depending on the family and the community they live in. Participation in formal early childhood education has shown to have significant and long lasting impact on children's achievement. The opportunities provided by early childhood for positive interactions with children and adults outside the immediate family appear to be one of the factors contributing to this positive effect (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003).

For most children formal literacy instruction begins in the first years of school. The influence of the teacher on students' learning has long been recognised as one of the key factors and it is what the teacher does that leads to improved outcomes for students. Effective teachers create classroom environments that facilitate learning because they have a culture of shared understandings and values such as caring and welcoming diversity. Teachers have to create the conditions for motivation. When students are motivated they develop positive attitudes towards their learning and become independent readers who gain life long benefits. The importance of students' achieving early success in learning to read is paramount because the effects of reading failure may generalise beyond the immediate reading environment and may affect students' motivation to learn.

In New Zealand there is an increasing diversity of students in classrooms and associated disparities in literacy achievement. Some groups of students have not been well served by conventional literacy practices in our schools. Maori children, Pasifika children, children whose home language is not English and children in low decile schools achieve at a lower level than other children. These disparities intend to increase during subsequent years at school. Developing good home school partnerships have shown that they can contribute and support children's learning. Each student has a range of significant people including family, teachers, peers and extended whanau, who can help with the acquisition of literacy skills. To be effective these people need to be able to complement and value one another's contributions.

The Research Context

The literature review has identified a need for a study that sought the views of under achieving students and their experiences in learning to read. There appeared to be limited information from low achieving students about their perceptions of reading, and programmes that have been effective in alleviating their problems associated with reading learning difficulties. Low achieving children's perceptions of reading at primary school and home may provide us with information that will help with the teaching of reading and how home and school can work together to support one another in this process. In the school selected for this research project, students who are having difficulty in literacy are referred by their teachers to the Special Needs Coordinator of the School (SENCO). This person is responsible for ensuring that those

students in the school who need additional support are provided with programmes that will address these needs. These referrals take place four times a year at the beginning of each new term. Discussions take place between the SENCO and the teacher aides as to how these students can be grouped and if some students would benefit from individual help. Letters are always sent to the parents or caregivers informing them of the additional help the school is providing. Normally students are withdrawn from their classes to work on programmes aimed at alleviating problems associated with reading but sometimes teacher aides will work in the classroom, helping the student or group of students. Sometimes students work in class with peers on paired reading activities. It will be important to know what approaches and programmes are most effective for students who exhibit substantial learning difficulties in reading.

Possible design elements for the study were considered and decisions made based on the research question and the findings of the literature review. Following the review of the literature design and methodology issues for the study were considered, and decisions made as a result. These decisions and the underlying reasoning are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Mā te moihio, ka mātou

Mā te mātou, ka marāma

It is learning that we know,

It is knowing that we understand.

(Tate, 1990)

Introduction

This chapter covers the methodology used in the study and the reasoning behind each decision made. The chapter is divided into sections which address the overview of the field of the research, the research focus, the use of focus groups in research and the limitations of the study. Research design issues relating to ethics, voluntary participation, informed consent, privacy, stress and psychological harm, sample selection, choice of school, data collection and analysis is discussed. The chapter closes with a brief summary.

Overview of Field of Research

Educational research falls under the broad category of social science research because it focuses on people, organisations and interactions. What distinguishes educational research is its focus: people, places and processes broadly related to teaching and learning and its purpose, the improvement of teaching and learning systems and practices for the betterment of all concerned and society at large (Mutch, 2005). It is not limited to formal educational structures or recognised activities associated with teaching and learning but can cover many general topics as well. The methods can be qualitative or quantitative or a mixture of both. Mutch, (2005) describes one common way of categorising research by the type of data gathering methods used: quantitative research generally uses methods that gather numerical data in order to generalise to a broader population whereas qualitative research generally uses methods that gather

descriptive accounts of the unique lived experiences of the participants to enhance understanding of a particular phenomena. She states that the research question or interest is the key factor in selecting the most appropriate research approach.

Qualitative research uses descriptive behaviour in order to strive to understand peoples' interpretation of events or situations. It can refer to research about peoples' lives, lived experiences, behaviour, emotions, and feelings as well as about organisational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena and interactions between nations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

A definition by what is meant by qualitative research is presented by Denzin & Lincoln, (2000):

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive material practices that makes the world visible. These practices turn the world into a series of representations including field notes, interviews conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that the qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p 3)

Reality is what people perceive it to be and data collected are their awareness of their environment. The human person is the primary collection instrument and the focus is on the design and procedures so that real, full, and deep data are obtained (Brotherson, 1994). According to Mutch, (2005) qualitative research uses inductive theory. This means the key idea for the theory arises out of the data. This is commonly called grounded theory, because the theory is grounded in the data. Induction looks for patterns and associations derived from observations of the world. In contrast, quantitative research uses deductive logic (Creswell, 2005) which means that it begins with an idea, usually called a hypothesis, and gathers evidence to prove or disprove it. Conversely, quantitative research approaches are older and have their roots in scientific traditions (Creswell, 2005). Supporters have argued that this research method is more valid and reliable. It generally uses methods that gather numerical

data in order to generalise to a wider population. Davidson & Tolich, (2003) suggest that quantitative and qualitative research have different starting points because they assume different things. Quantitative research deals with 'hard' data. It counts because its data can be counted or measured and the researchers know in advance what to count. In contrast qualitative research focuses on reflecting the quality of something and the constructing of meaning from both the participants' perceptions and that of the researcher.

Qualitative research seeks to understand a situation as constructed by its participants (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This approach chosen by the researcher, allowed the use of semi structured focus group interviews to help to understand the participants' experiences and perceptions in learning to read and those reading practices that were effective or less effective during their primary schooling. The overriding assumptions of focus group interviews are that people are valuable sources of information about themselves and that much can be learned from direct extended conversations with individuals whose thoughts and opinions are critical to understanding a topic.

The Research Focus

In view of the differing research methods it would seem more appropriate to use a qualitative approach to enhance knowledge and understanding of low achieving students' perceptions of their reading and what supports or barriers they have faced in learning to read. The researcher decided to use focus group interviews because they were considered the most useful tool for answering the designated research questions. It also offered a way for the researcher to listen to the plural voices of others (Madriz, 2000). The study was based around the gathering of new data from first hand resources, the students. Information was gathered from eight students using semi structured focus group interviews. The interviews were conducted at a school that the researcher worked at as a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour. It seemed fitting to investigate the perceptions of effective/ineffective literacy practices of low achieving children in one of the researcher's own schools which could provide some new directions for teaching in an effort to better meet the needs of groups of students who are working below their expected levels in reading.

In New Zealand schools, the current pedagogy underpinning literacy programmes aligns with a social constructivist view of learning where students construct meaning within social settings. This pedagogy links well with the qualitative research paradigm that aims to uncover the lived reality or constructed meanings of the participants (Mutch, 2005). In the social constructivist paradigm, as described by Vacca, (2002) the experiences and views of teachers and students within a classroom environment are at the forefront of learning and teaching in content classrooms. Knowledge is not dispensed from teacher to students or from text to students but is always under construction. The social context of the classroom affects the way students interact with the teacher, the text and with one another. Effective learning experiences will increasingly depend on social learning strategies and the ability of the teacher to design learning opportunities between and among students who have different knowledge (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004).

Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews provide a number of advantages relative to other types of research. One of the strengths of focus group interviews for research in education is that individuals are invited to participate in a forum where their diverse opinions and perspectives are desired (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). It has been suggested by Vaughn, Schumm, & Singagub, (1996) that focus group interviews provide an efficient and effective method for gathering in-depth qualitative data. The open response format of the focus group provides an opportunity to obtain large and rich amounts of data in the respondents' own words. They allow the researcher to interact directly with the respondents which in turn allows for opportunities for the clarification of responses. Respondents can qualify responses or give contingent answers to questions and it is possible for the researcher to observe nonverbal responses such as gestures, smiles or frowns which may carry information that supplements and on occasion even contradicts the verbal response (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007; Vaughn, Schumm, & Singagub, 1996).

This method is also recommended by Dockrell, Lewis, & Lindsay, (2000) because it allows for the possibility that the discussions amongst individuals would spark off new ideas among the participants and provide social support in the school environment. The group environment allows greater anonymity and therefore helps

individuals to disclose information more freely. The synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might have not been uncovered in individual interviews or it may result in students merely reiterating what their friends say or what they feel the researcher wants to hear. It has been suggested that focus groups may be one of the few research tools available for obtaining data from children or from individuals who are not particularly literate (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

Focus group research has been the subject of much controversy and criticism that is generally associated with two concerns: first, the view that focus groups do not yield 'hard' quantitative data and second the concern that group members may not be representative of a larger population, because of both the small sample numbers and the idiosyncratic nature of the group discussion (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). The very subjectivity of the inquiry can lead to difficulties in establishing reliability and validity of the approaches and information and the problems in preventing or detecting researcher induced bias. Mutch, (2005) believes that although researchers do their best to be objective, research is not neutral but is historically and socially situated. The live and immediate nature of the interaction as described by Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, (2007) may lead the researcher or decision-maker to place greater faith in the findings than is actually warranted. The authors feel that the greatest limitations associated with focus groups is that each group really represents a single observation. Even if eight people are involved in a group discussion this does not mean that there are eight independent observations. By definition and design the statements of focus groups are influenced by the group interaction and the ideas or opinions of others. As a result of this influence, and the fact that it is seldom the case that more than a few groups are conducted on any one topic, statistical estimation is not possible nor is it appropriate to generalise to specific parameters based of focus group results. The generalisations that arise from these focus group interviews tend to be more general than specific and more cautious and more descriptive (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

While teachers' perspectives of instructional practices have been the core of educational research for years, there has been very little research that has addressed students' perceptions. Vaughn, Schumm, & Singagub, (1996) have found that insights

of students of all ages, can add an interesting dimension to our understanding of what happens in the classroom and how students learn. Focussing on children's perceptions may assist the body of evidence that is already available on reading. Nuttall, (2001) believed that there was a need for research that focuses on the realities of student experiences and the learning that resulted from that experience. This idea aligns with Carr, (2000) who thinks that seeking children's perspectives is vital for the bridging of the child adult gap. This co-construction of a mutual understanding is important in the learning process. Dockrell, Lindsay & Lewis, (2000) consider that children are never passive participants in the research process and they respond to situations they find themselves in trying to make sense of the demands placed upon them.

It has been suggested by Tobin, (2000) that in research situations children can either resist or facilitate our attempts to know them. He believes that all utterances are contextual and therefore to understand the statements made in focus group discussions we need to know as much as possible about the environment. There is always the danger that the researcher will project their own connotations onto their informants. In spite of these concerns Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, (2000) consider that there is a role for educational research as it gives students a voice which will empower them to have some influence on national policy, promotion of school improvement and monitoring the provision for vulnerable and excluded groups.

Limitations of the Study

The focus group participants involved purposeful sampling, so the study must be viewed with prudence. These students were chosen because they were working below their expected levels in reading, but were deemed by their teachers to be reasonably articulate and would be able to participate with others in a focus group format. The intent of the focus group interviews was to report the views of the participants, not to generalise to larger groups. Interviewing students can present some ethical dilemmas for the researcher so a senior member of the staff was also present at the interviews. It was acknowledged by the researcher that there are difficulties when adults are questioning children and even more so when the adults are perceived to be in positions of power as the teacher may have been seen by the students. This status and position in relationships between teachers and students was considered by the

researcher as the interviewees could have been considered vulnerable (Costley, 2000). To alleviate this, the study participants were given reassurances of anonymity and were reassured that their opinions would be valued regardless of how different or unusual they were. The agenda for the discussion was outlined by the researcher and ground rules for each session were decided on by both the students and the researcher. These rules included acceptance of one another's views no matter how different these may be, "no put downs" and the fact that what is discussed during the interviews stayed within that room. It was emphasised that their ideas or views may help our understanding of how students learn to read and this may in turn inform future policy in their school.

Ethical Issues

There are several ethical issues to be considered when facilitating children's perspectives in research. Groundwater(2006) cited in (Dockett & Perry, 2007) notes:

If we consult children we may put them in positions of vulnerability, if we do not consult them we risk overlooking the important contribution they can make, if we treat them as vulnerable we may be patronising them and imaging them to be powerless and irresponsible ... If we regard them as invulnerable we may underestimate their fragility... the fundamental concern is to prevent harm or doing wrong to others, it is a concern to promote the good and be respectful and fair. (p 9)

Various strategies were used to ensure that this research was carried out in an ethical manner and these are discussed below. It has been suggested by Neuman, (1997) p 443, that "A researchers personal moral code is the strongest defence against unethical behaviour.... Ethical research depends on the integrity of the individual researcher and his or her values". The researcher kept this in mind when dealing with the interview subjects.

Ethical Clearance for the Study

Permission to carry out this study was sought from the Principal and the Board of Trustees from the school concerned (Appendix 1). A letter giving this consent was received in October 2006. Written permission was also received from the teacher (Appendix 2) who was to be present at the interviews.

Ethical clearance for the study was applied for to the Ethical Clearance Committee Christchurch College of Education and was granted on the 3rd of November 2006.

Voluntary Participation

All participants in the study were volunteers. The eight students who received the information about the research topic all agreed to participate which was unexpected as the researcher thought that she would only have five or six students in the group. Efforts were made to allow the participants freedom to choose whether or not to participate. These included a full briefing outlining the reasons for the research and the strategies that would allow students to withdraw at any stage of the research. Some participants may have felt some degree of coercion arising from their age and the fact that these interviews were conducted within the school setting so the researcher sought to ensure that the students understood that their participation was entirely voluntary and withdrawal was accepted at any time.

Informed consent

Informed consent was sought from parents or caregivers of prospective participants (Appendix 3). Research by Vaughn, Schumm, & Singagub, (1996) suggested that year five & six students aged between nine and twelve years of age are mature enough to participate in some decisions that affect therefore the researcher sought written consent from the participants. An information and consent form was prepared (Appendix 4). These were mailed to the parents and students involved and then collected in by the school. Time was allowed for parents/caregivers to consider the issues and make contact with the researcher or authorities if they wished. All students returned signed consent forms from themselves and from their parents/caregivers. The parents who were interviewed also signed consent forms (Appendix 5). Students were

asked at each interview if they felt comfortable taking part and if they had any questions that needed answering.

Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality

Privacy was protected while administering the interviews by having the respondents seated in an interview room well away from the distractions of the rest of the school. Students' anonymity was protected. The name of the school was not revealed. It was referred to as an urban school within the wider Tai Tokerau region. Participants were not identified by name at any stage and transcripts only recorded what was said not by whom. Confidentiality was maintained by keeping all taped interviews and transcripts in the researcher's office at home.

Stress or Psychological Harm

This was an issue because the study was based on social research methods. The study was designed to avoid undue stress on the participants. Efforts were made at all times to ensure that the students felt comfortable and were able to respond honestly without pressure. As these efforts could not be assessed beforehand the researcher ensured that the participants had the right to withdraw from the study

Selecting the Sample

Eight students were chosen to participate in the study. These students were chosen from four different Year five & six classes at the school to give more of an overall perspective of the school. All the students who were approached by the researcher took part in the study so the size of the focus group was slightly larger than the five or six participants as originally anticipated by the researcher and as recommended by Vaughn, Schumm, & Singagub (1996). Initially these students were identified by their teachers as those working below their chronological age in reading by using PROBE (Pool, Parkin, & Parkin, 1999). This assessment tool that is norm referenced in New Zealand is used in the senior syndicate of the school. The students were in their last years at primary school and six of these students would move on to intermediate school the next year. The group consisted of two Year five students, one male and one female and six Year six students, four males and two females. At the time of the

research they ranged in age from 9.9 years to 12.0 years with an average age of 10.8 years. According to Spethman, (cited in Vaughn et al., 1996) the participants should be no more than two years apart in age levels to prevent domination by older students. This recommendation was taken into consideration when choosing the group. All but one student, were identified as Maori by their whanau according to school records entry data. The selection of the participants was not random. Convenience sampling as described by Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, (2007) is the most common method of selecting participants in focus groups as the intent was to draw some conclusions about the population of interest. As the students' perceptions of what supports, or barriers to learning to read were sought, the students needed to be old enough to have a good understanding of what they were being asked to do and to be articulate enough to contribute to the interview process.

In order to triangulate the data and to determine the heavy emphasis on support from home, the results from this research were shared with one of the focus group participant's parents. Both these parents identify themselves as Maori. The intention was to contribute to the understanding that parents have regarding their experiences of how their child learnt to read and how the partnership between home and school had developed over the time. The researcher had known these parents at a previous school so an element of trust had already been established. The researcher believed that they had valued this earlier contact and felt that they would have the confidence to tell their story honestly from their perspectives. Their child had attended three schools so the parents were able to make comparisons between the schools.

Data was provided by the participant students' teachers using running records of text reading (Clay, 2001). The running records procedure provides a framework for systematically observing a child's reading behaviour. This procedure developed by Marie Clay, employs standard methods with recognised conventions for recording exactly what the child does as he/she reads. It is through careful observation, reliable scoring and interpretation that the teacher gains valuable insights into the child's strategies for solving unknown words, competence for drawing together all sources of information, self monitoring and self correction strategies and the child's willingness to take risks (Ministry of Education, 2003b). The school also used PROBE (Pool, Parkin, & Parkin, 1999). This assessment helps teachers assess silent reading

comprehension and well as listening comprehension. Six types of questions, from literal to reaction, measure a student's comprehension. The scores are presented as percentages that can be recorded as reading ages based on the text. Further information was gathered by the researcher using BURT (Gilmore, Croft, & Reid, 1981). This is a word recognition test which helps teachers to make a broad estimate of a student's reading achievement which in turn is helpful in grouping and choosing appropriate reading material and helps indicate specific weaknesses such as poor syllabification. Supplementary Tests of Achievement in Reading, STAR (Elley, 2000) was used by the researcher as this type of assessment test is normed by New Zealand standards and the results are presented as stanines. This assessment tests students' close reading ability such as word recognition, sentence comprehension, paragraph comprehension, vocabulary range and the language of advertising.

School

The school selected for study was an urban contributing Year one to six, decile four school in the wider Tai Tokerau region.¹ The school roll was 456 pupils with a teaching staff of 22. The ethnic composition was: Pakeha 51 per cent, Maori 41 per cent and other ethnicities (including African, British Filipino, Indian Asian Dutch, Irish Ukrainian) 8 per cent. The composition of gender was even with 50 per cent boys and 50 per cent girls.

The school chosen was one in which the researcher works as a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (Ministry of Education, 2007). Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) positions were introduced in New Zealand in 1999 as part of the Special Education policy initiatives at the time. The intent of the Special Education Policy was that all the students who require specialist services and teacher support receive them. Support and resources are prioritised to those students with the highest needs. RTLB have a pivotal role to play in assisting cluster schools to meet the needs of their students with learning and behavioural difficulty. The researcher works with another RTLB in a cluster of six schools. These schools include a Christian Area school, two urban decile one full primary schools, two high decile

¹ The decile of a school is determined by the Ministry of Education who rank schools from one to ten according to their demographic, socio-economic communities. This influences state funding. The lower the decile the more state funding they receive.

schools situated in rural areas and one decile four school in which the research was undertaken.

The relationship of the researcher to the school was an important factor in the selection of the school for this study as the researcher had worked in this school for the past eight years and had worked with senior staff and many of the teachers. The management of the school indicated that they would be interested in the results and how these findings could be incorporated into the organisation of the school. The decile of the school was important as the researcher felt that the experiences these participants described could be relevant to the other schools within the cluster.

As ethical clearance does not allow the researcher to identify the school, this school's name has been deleted in the Education Review Office (ERO) reference and shall be referred to as School X. A recent Education Review Office Evaluation report (2007) stated that they felt the Principal and his team, through consultation and self review had been proactive in restructuring the school management so that it was better placed to change and guide teaching practices to increase the school focus on improving student learning. It was noted that the relationships between staff and students was positive and affirming. It was felt that staff were interested in students as individuals and continued to nurture them. The learning environment for students was described as inclusive and the mutual respect between adults and children was evident throughout the school.

Most of the students at School X were achieving at levels at or above their chronological ages in reading and spelling. However, senior managers had identified that a stronger focus needs to be placed on written language since less than half of the students are achieving at expected levels. It had been suggested that senior staff now need to collate and analyse student achievement information in ways that enable them to draw conclusions about student achievement across the school and about the achievement of cohorts of students over time. The analysis of achievement data should also help managers to evaluate the effectiveness of their programmes for special needs or abilities.

The report identified several areas of improvement that were pertinent to this study. It was noted that although teachers used a wide variety of assessment tools, they needed

to identify the sources of assessment information that would give them the most useful information. It was felt that a more robust analysis of data would help identify students' learning needs more effectively and should help teachers' personalise learning for individual students. Withdrawal programmes were also identified as an area for improvement, as there was no system in place to ensure that classroom teachers were aware of the learning that was taking place within these withdrawal programmes, or that the teachers had input into these interventions. It was felt that students' learning should become seamless between class and withdrawal programmes so that it can be further developed or supported in either context. It was suggested that managers also needed to establish ways to evaluate the impact of withdrawal programmes on student achievement. ERO felt that the use of formative assessment strategies was not evident in many of the classrooms. Senior managers had identified the need to strengthen the use of formative assessment practices so that students are given better information on what they have done well and the steps they need to take to improve further. Gaining insights into their own development and processes for achievement would help students develop skills that would support them in lifelong learning.

The previous ERO report identified the need for the Board of Trustees to formally develop plans, policies and targets for improving the achievement of Maori students. As a direct result of this, a hui (meeting) was organised in 2006 to engage with Maori whanau (extended family) in order to celebrate and raise the achievement of Maori students. As a result of this, a core group of Maori parents are now involved in leadership discussions to establish a common vision for their tamariki (children). This group is also planning to strengthen the communication between the Maori community and the Board of Trustees through further planned hui. In 2007, a specialist Maori teacher was appointed to provide a weekly programme of te reo me ona tikanga Maori (Maori language that incorporates the culture and values associated with being Maori) to all classes. This initiative provides support for students, in-class professional development for staff and provides opportunities for the natural inclusion of te reo Maori in classroom programmes.

Data Collection

Quality quantitative research depends on quality interviewing. Opie, (2003) states that a researcher's objective is to facilitate the respondents' descriptions and reflections of their experiences. The researcher ensured that the participants were aware of the purpose of the research and attempted to establish a level of comfort in an atmosphere that would be perceived as non evaluative and non threatening. Three semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted by the researcher and the senior teacher who has the responsibility for special needs in the school to provide opportunities for students to share and reflect on their life's experiences of learning to read. This method recommended by Dockrell, Lewis, & Lindsay, (2000) allowed for the possibility that the discussions between individuals would spark off new ideas among the participants and provide social support in the school environment. Vaughn, Schumm, & Singagub, (1996) believe that it is important to remember that the purpose of the focus interview is not on consensus building but it is about obtaining a range of opinions from the students about their views.

Interview questions were trialled with six children from a year six class in the school, other than the sample, to ensure that these were questions that students were able to answer confidently. To ensure that the sample students were comfortable with the microphone and having their conversations recorded the researcher and the teacher provided the students with experiences of using the equipment and the listening to their responses. This was important to develop the students' confidence and to rearrange the seating to enable those students with quieter voices to sit nearer to the microphone.

The interviews were conducted at a venue within the school that was away from distractions from the rest of the school. Three interviews were conducted with the research participants. One student was away from school for the first interview but at all other sessions all the students were present. The senior teacher in charge of special needs at the school was in attendance at all the interviews. Each interview was audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. The research assistant was present at each session.

The interviews were semi structured and centred round three themes. The initial session looked at the students' understanding of the reading process, the importance of reading and their feelings about learning to read (Appendix 6). The second session looked at the students' experiences of reading at school and what happened in class during reading sessions (Appendix 7) and the third session was about the students' reading experiences at home (Appendix 8). The questions were ordered so that experience/behaviour questions came first. These are generally the easiest ones for the respondents to answer and good places to begin to get the interviewees talking comfortably (Glesne, 1999).

Data Analysis

In this research report qualitative interpretation begins with clarifying the meanings associated with this set of interviews. The researcher needed to find out what were the students' perceptions of reading and what barriers or supports had they faced in the acquisition of reading skills. Focus group interviews were used to encapsulate the students' ideas. The three focus group interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. The research assistant was present at all the interviews as recommended by Vaughn, Schumm, & Singagub, (1996). According to Silverman,(2001) tapes and transcripts have three clear advantages compared with other kinds of qualitative data: tapes are a public record, they can be replayed and transcripts improved, and they preserve the sequence of talk.

The first readings through the data included the researcher listening and re-listening to the tapes while checking these off against the transcripts and making minor changes as necessary. It was only then that the transcripts were studied line by line. At first the researcher simply highlighted key phrases with regard to the general issues that arose from the three related topics of the interview process. At the next stage of the data analysis the researcher shared the transcripts with a colleague who also works as a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour and has been involved in recent research experience. Both had their own own copies of the transcripts. The raw data was highlighted to identify those sections of the text that were relevant to the research questions that inspired the research project. The segmenting and coding of data were then discussed by both the researcher and the colleague to identify key themes and patterns and to see if there was agreement as to whether that particular data was

important. Having more than just the researcher analysing the data is recommended by (Patton, 2001; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007) who feel that using multiple analysts provides an opportunity to access the reliability of the coding, at least with respect of major themes and issues.

The next readings of the data, was undertaken by the researcher with the aim of further developing the coding categories or classification system. This required numerous passes through the transcripts as the categories and overall themes evolved. The codes may have referred to a phrase, or a group of words, and some information was double coded as it was relevant to more than one category. Coffey & Atkinson, (1996) advise that attaching codes to data and generating concepts have important functions in enabling us rigorously to review what the data is saying. The focus group interviews looked at the students' perceptions of their acquisition of reading skills and through coding of the information received, themes emerged from the three interviews.

The move from coding to interpretation is critical according to Coffey & Atkinson, (1996) and involves a number of discrete levels. The first level that the researcher needed to address was to retrieve the data and display it in such a way that it could be easily read. The data that related to a particular theme or category was sorted on the computer so that all material relevant to a particular theme was placed together. This then enabled the researcher to review the themes and abandon those that were unnecessary and rename those where the theme/category proved too narrow. This was particularly apparent when looking at the influence of parents on students' acquisition of reading skills and the parents' relationship with the school.

The researcher then worked between the data and the theme/categories to verify the meaningfulness and the accuracy of these and the placement of that data. This data is presented in the following chapter.

Summary

The study involved a research method from the qualitative paradigm. Three semi-structured focus group interviews were held with eight students selected from four different classes in an urban decile four school. The sample of Year five and six

students were initially selected by their teachers based on low achieving rates in reading compared to their chronological ages. These students were deemed by their teachers to be articulate enough to take part in the focus group interviewing process. Further testing by the researcher confirmed this choice.

Data from the focus group interviews were coded and analysed for overall trends. Ethical issues were considered. Informed consent was sought from the parents or caregivers of the respondents and the students were also involved in the process. Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were protected. Arrangements were made for students to withdraw at any stage if they wished. Once the data gathering phase of the research was complete, the information was analysed. The results of this process are outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Research Results

Introduction

The data gathered from the semi-structured focus group interviews were analysed and considered under headings related to the research question posed in the study. The results of this analysis are reported in this chapter with conclusions and possible implications being discussed in later chapters.

Literacy achievement will be discussed using the results of running records of text reading (Clay, 2001), conducted by the teachers. It has been noted by Timperley & Parr, (2004) that teachers spend a great deal of time formally assessing students and recording and reporting the results, however the research seems to reflect that this information is not necessarily used to inform teaching decisions. Problems associated with this use of diagnostic testing as identified by Timperley & Parr, (2004) included the following: fluent silent readers often read inaccurately, so reading aloud is not a good indicator of reading level; administering records within a two week time frame meant the teachers could not remember all the diagnostic information so they used running records mainly for grouping students or deciding on their book level; and administering the tool was very time consuming taking up to 20 percent of time allocated to reading. Some of this data could have been misinterpreted by the teachers hence the use of standardised testing by the researcher. The three semi-structured focus group interviews centred around:

- general knowledge about reading;
- reading at school and
- reading at home.

These interviews were analysed and considered under the following themes that emanated from the research question posed for the study. These included the following:

- reading as a life skill;

- home school partnerships;
- classroom management and teacher feedback;
- instructional reading strategies;
- information and communication technology
- personal reading;
- students reading aloud;
- teacher reading to students and
- the importance of peer collaboration in the reading process.

These results were then shared with one of the participant's parents and their ideas and views are reported at the end of the chapter.

Literacy Achievement

Focus Group Interview Participants						
Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Year Level	Chron Age	Burt Band	STAR Stanine
Student 1	Female	Maori	5	10.2	7.11- 8.05	3
Student 2	Male	Maori	5	9.9	9.06 - 10.00	3
Student 3	Female	Maori	6	10.11	9.06 - 10.00	4
Student 4	Female	Maori	6	11.2	10.10 -11.04	2
Student 5	Male	Maori	6	11.1	8.10 -9.04	2
Student 6	Male	Maori	6	11.2	8.05 - 8.11	4
Student 7	Male	Non Maori	6	10.11	7.03 -7.09	1
Student 8	Male	Maori	6	12.00	11.11- 12.05	2

In general the teachers' assessments of the students' reading levels were accurate and all students were working below their chronological ages. This data was supported by STAR results (Elley, 2001) and BURT (Gilmore, Croft, & Reid, 1981) testing. The teachers at the school used running records of text reading (Clay, 2001) and PROBE (Pool, Parkin, & Parkin, 1999) which is norm referenced for New Zealand for their reading based assessments. Further assessment by the researcher using STAR, (Elley, 2000) confirmed that the eight students were below their expected levels in comparison to their age related peers. This test enables teachers of years three to nine

to diagnose students' performance and assess their achievement in several aspects of reading (word recognition, sentence comprehension, and paragraph comprehension and vocabulary range). In STAR, stanine one, two and three are considered below average and stanine four is on the lower end of average. In the assessment carried out by the researcher one student scored at stanine one, three scored at stanine two, two scored at stanine three and two of the students scored at stanine four. The Burt (Gilmore, Croft, & Reid, 1981) word recognition test undertaken by the researcher demonstrated that six of the students were decoding below their chronological age but two of the students were indeed decoding at or above their age level. Elley, (2001) reported that from the 175 schools participating in the trialling and standardisation process of STAR, students from low decile schools scored consistently one stanine lower in each test than students from high decile schools. The school that these students attended was a decile four but it was interesting to note that as a group only two students had started and completed their schooling at this one school.

Reading as a Life Skill

As an introduction, the students were asked to describe reading and say why they thought they did reading at school. Several of the students were able to see the real life connection between learning to read and its importance as a life long learning skill:

I think reading is to help you learning and give you a good education.

If I couldn't read I probably wouldn't get a job and I would be poor.

When they get a job contract or something they wouldn't be able to sign it and read it.

These life skill findings coincide with Nash, (2002) who sees reading as fundamental to success at school and if children cannot read more or less at their age appropriate level they will be unable to keep pace with the curriculum and almost invariably leave school with poor qualifications.

In contrast some students saw the skill of learning to read on a functional skills level and were unable to make the link between this and the purposes of learning to read;

I think reading is to sound words out and stuff.

I think reading is big books with pictures on it and lots of words.

Reading is fun and if you don't know what a word is you can break it up into syllables.

Home School Partnerships

All students reported strong support from home and whanau in the acquisition of reading skills.

I learned to read when my Mum read to me and then I got used to it.

I learned to read because Dad told me to sound out the words. My Dad wrote out some words and I had to tell him what they were.

At home I've received help from my sisters, my brothers and my Dad and Mum because they helped me by correcting the words that I don't know.

Most students reported having access to reading materials at home:

I have all kinds of books at home, like baby books and all that and I keep them in the drawers of my sister's bed.

We have those history books; we got that book on Egypt and stuff.

My Dad's got Maori books, New Zealand history books and dictionaries and newspapers.

Parents and family members or whanau are a major influence on student learning. Baker, (2003) believes that parents play a critical role in the literacy development of their children and what parents believe and say does make a difference. Absolum, (2006) expounds this theory further by stating that what varies from family to family is the extent to which this influence is positive or negative. There is much research that indicates if teachers and schools can establish the right relationships with parents, student learning will be improved (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003). The home environment has the potential to provide students with a good literacy grounding prior to going to school and to reinforce and augment literacy activities during the school age years (Caygill & Chamberlain, 2004).

Results from (OECD PISA, 2000) which focuses on low socio-economic status (SES) student achievement in reading literacy, indicates that large differences can be observed between high and low achievers in a number of student related factors including interest and engagement in reading, time spent on homework and student concepts in reading and academic ability. However one of the largest differences relates to the educational resources available in the home. Nash, (2002) suggests the number of books in the home is one of the best indicators of educational success available. As a measure of 'cultural capital' this information is as good as occupational class at predicting school success.

One student made the following comment:

We don't actually have any books at home because I return all my library books back.

It was also evident from the students' comments that whanau also read material at home. Remarks made by the students included:

My Mum and Dad do read but they don't read to me and they just read adult books and newspaper and TV Guides and all that.

My Mum absolutely adores her magazines and my Dad loves to read the newspaper and yacht books.

My Mum and Dad like to read the newspaper to see what is going to be on and they say sometimes if there is a dance competition on well they want me to enter it and stuff.

Most children reported positively about reading orally to family members. Parents and whanau may see this as a presentation or performance as described by McNaughton, (2002).

My Mum and Dad think I'm good because I put a lot of expression into it.

My Mum and Dad and Uncle and Nan think I'm good because they can hear me read.

Alton Lee, (2003) declares that parental and caregiver involvement in their children's education is crucial to improved outcomes. Partnerships that align school and home practices and enables parents to actively support their children's in-school learning have shown to have the strongest impacts.

Classroom Management and Teacher Feedback

The way classrooms are organised and managed are fundamental to students achieving success in reading and can have a significant influence on students' acquisition of skills (Absolum, 2006; Brophy, 1983; Pressley, 2002). Positive relationships with the teacher were evident when the students were asked if they liked it when the teacher took them for reading:

100%. (This means that this child liked it when his teacher worked with him 100 percent of the time.)

Because if you are stuck on words she helps you.

The teacher always tells you tips on reading - like use expressions.

Positive outcomes for students of diverse background have been associated with teachers' gathering, analysing and the using assessment data that reflects a detailed knowledge of all students. As indicated by Wylie, (2004) children's ways of judging how well they are doing at school did not show clear-cut groupings in terms of attributions to either their own ability or effort in terms of extrinsic or intrinsic indications. The students in this sample were aware of the assessment procedures used by the teacher to ability group them in reading but the following comments indicate they were not aware of personal results and what they needed to do to improve.

Our teacher takes us down to this place for reading and he puts points up when we get the words right, he puts a tick on top and he made this other book that counts your ticks and it tells you what group you are in.

She made us read stories to her and if we got one right she would put a tick. I think that she decides what reading group we are in because we have similar reading ages.

When asked the question 'How good does your teacher think you are at reading?' one student responded:

I haven't asked her, but she did a reading test on me and I don't know.

Other students were aware of some aspects of reading that they were good at or that they needed to do to improve:

She reckons I'm good and I'm improving on visualizing my story.

She reckons I'm good at like, if I make a mistake I go back and correct it.

She thinks I'm good at doing the commas, full stops and exclamation marks.

These students were able to recognise when their teachers were providing relevant and useful feedback. In his meta-analysis of a data base of 180,000 studies representing over fifty million students, Hattie, (1999) ranked the level of effect that

instructional events had for enhancing student achievement. From this analysis he stated that the most powerful of these were feedback providing information on how and what a student understands and misunderstands and what directions they must take to improve. Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, (2003) draw attention to this very point in their report to the Ministry of Education entitled *Te Kotahitanga* where the experiences of Years 9- 13 students indicate that they were not given responsibility for their learning and performance. These views were also reported in Ministry of Education (2005c) Forum comment, where students felt that they did not get specific feedback on what they are good at in reading and what they needed to improve. Promoting further learning as expressed by Absolum, (2006) is about strategies and techniques used to close the gap between the current state of learning and the current desired goals. Clarke, (2001) suggests that student's should share in the learning intention of all tasks they are asked to do. When teachers are taking running records with their students they could explain what the ticks mean and what students need to do to improve in their reading. The students need to know what level they are working at to enable them to set some realistic goals. This is even more important if they are working below their chronological ages.

Instructional Reading Strategies

Effective teachers carefully select texts and tasks for reading in order to engage students in rich experiences with texts enabling students to develop their expertise in becoming literate. Students were able to talk about the variety of reading materials that were in use in their classrooms:

We read chapter books, SRA (Science Research Association) reading laboratory and journals and other books.

We read sometimes sad books like Santa Pause and adventure books like Snoggle and some other ones.

The students' responses indicated that their teachers used a variety of instructional strategies to engage their students in text based activities. These strategies supported by the text *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8*, (2006) could help students

progress in literacy learning. Favoured reading responses expressed by the students included:

My favourite response is the work sheets.

My best reading response is KWL. (K= what the student knows, W= what the student knows, L= what did they learn) because it gets my brain thinking and its fun for me to do.

My favourite is the Y chart because it's easy. (A Y chart, examines the following: looks like, feels like and sounds like and each part of the Y is filled in).

Information and Communication Technology

Rapid changes in media technology have provided children with unprecedented access to global information and a range of vicarious experiences which in turn generate common scripts that can support children's learning (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003). It is suggested by the Ministry of Education, (2006) that teachers should consider literacy teaching and learning in the light of diverse and changing ways of communicating. One of the teachers of this group of students used computers and animation so that his class could present stories for younger students in the school. This was very popular and the children were motivated by this medium. One of the students reported:

We go into Microsoft Power Point and get these backgrounds and you go onto clip art and get some pictures, type in the pictures, write the things that you want to get and then you go into clip art and get them and when you have finished that you have to do something else.

Another group of students in another class were re-writing popular stories for junior classes so there was a purpose and a ready audience for their compositions:

*We are making a book for the juniors. We choose a book and our book's name is **A Party for the Alley Cats** and we have to rewrite the story and then draw the pictures and colour it all in and then read the story into a microphone.*

Personal Reading

Initial experiences in learning to read influence later competencies in reading as well as the development of reading related self beliefs such as self concept. Children who struggle to learn to read quickly come to believe that they are not good readers and that reading is difficult and something they do not like (Chapman & Tunmer, 2002). Children who read well and have good vocabularies will read more, whereas those students who have inadequate vocabularies will read less and as a result will have slower development of vocabulary knowledge which inhibits further growth in reading ability (Stanovich, 1986). The gap between the two groups increases each year so that the good readers leave the poor readers far behind. There is strong evidence to support students' access to texts and the amount of reading they do, to their achievement in reading. Over half of the students reported negative views regarding recreational reading. Motivation is affected by self concept and a sense of self efficacy. Maori students generally express less interest in reading than other ethnic groups, report lower engagement in reading and participate in more limited recreational reading activities (Ministry of Education, 2000a). These children also reported a lack of interest in reading in their spare time, both at school and at home.

I don't like it much – because I'd rather go outside and run around or if I had a rugby ball, kick it around.

I like don't like reading because the stories are long.

I don't really like reading because I get impatient and I can't visualize the story.

I don't like reading much because I can't read the words sometimes, because they are hard.

I don't like reading that much because I'd rather draw something.

When asked how students would feel if they were given a book as a present one boy said:

I'd be gutted.

Others modified their responses with comments like:

It really depends, if it's me, I like action and war, killing and stuff.

It has to be a war book or an action book because I love them, they are cool.

All the children in the sample had access to the school's library and visited there as part of the schools reading programme. Comments made by three of the students did not reflect that this was a favoured activity:

When I go to the school library I go in there, I look around for a book and then I grab it and if it's stink I don't grab it and if no one is on the computer I'll go play on that, or go and have a sit down and then go back out.

I sometimes like going to the library and I just go in and go look for books that I want and go get a cushion and sit down and then if it gets too boring I just put the cushion back and the book back and go out.

I would go get a book that I like and then go and sit down in the corner where the cushions are but I normally get distracted and then I talk.

Past negative experiences of borrowing the school's library books were described by the students:

I don't take library books from the school because I leave them at home or I lose them.

I don't take books from the school library because if I take them home I will probably lose them and my Mum will find them but she won't know that I took them from the school then she'll chuck it in the rubbish, then I'll know.

I don't take books home because I don't have a book bag and there are no plastic bags in our room.

The city centre has a brand new Public Library. This facility has received a lot of publicity and is particularly child friendly, with many resources children can use or borrow. Half of the children had visited this facility but none were members or had utilised the borrowing facilities.

I've been to the new library and there's like computers and stuff and kid areas where you can get books and you can search up the things on the computer.

I went up to the library because my Dad was choosing some Maori books and I was with this lady making stuff on the floor.

The library's got a cafeteria there and it has got games, computers and some rare books that people haven't read and me and my Dad sometimes go to the library and it's cool.

Libraries provide a community resource of texts in various media and forms for wide ranging purposes. Being effective library users fosters children's learning and reading practices. The children's sections of the library provide a variety of activities. Children can listen to CD's with headphones. DVD's provide interactive software which students find stimulating and they can use the computers to find books or do research.

Students Reading Aloud

The students did not look positively on reading aloud in front of the group or class. These comments from the students emphasise those feelings:

Not cool because I don't like it. It's embarrassing.

Shy, because everyone looks at you.

It really depends, because if I know the people I won't be shy, but if I don't I would feel uncomfortable and shy.

I don't like reading aloud because people get distracted and it's embarrassing.

I think its shame because you might get a word wrong and everyone will laugh at you.

Sometimes I like it and sometimes I'm shy because sometimes there is very long words and some people know the word and if I don't know it I get shy.

In her analysis of the 2000 National Education Monitoring Project NEMP data on students attitudes to reading Eley, reported in (Gilmore, Lovett, & van Hasselt, 2003) that reading aloud to the class was the least favoured reading activity, particularly for boys. Fletcher, Parkhill and Fa'ofai, (2005) also found that Pasifika students did not like reading aloud to classmates.

Teacher Reading to Students

The Ministry of Education, (2006) recommends that teachers in Years five to eight classes should make reading to students a daily part of every classroom programme. Such reading provides a good model for students and expands students' awareness and appreciation of language and helps them build up their personal vocabularies. This in turn helps to develop an extensive vocabulary which improves both their reading comprehension and their writing. The students reported that the advantages of the teacher reading aloud to them depended on the teacher's ability to make the story 'come alive' an attribution that Mooney cited in Ministry of Education, (2003b) highlights as positive for literacy acquisition. The comments from the following two students typify these findings:

I like it because after a hard game of sports we come in and relax and our teacher will just read us a story and it's cool.

I like Mrs C. reading to us because I like the way she uses her expression and so forth.

These findings were similar to those found in the Fletcher, Parkhill & Fa'afoi 's, (2005) study of factors that promote and support Pasifika students in reading.

Peer Collaboration

Students reported favourably on buddy reading with other classes:

Every Friday room 5 and 10 will get together and we have to go pick our buddy, my buddy's name is R. and we read to them and she'll read to us and then we will have to ask her some questions.

Cameron, (2002) reports that peer tutoring harnesses the natural helping relationships that occur between children. Usually one student (tuakana) who has more experience than their partner (teina) is taught to support the teina through tasks they cannot yet do on their own. Glynn, Berryman, Bidois, Furlong, Thatcher, Walker & Atvars, (1996) noted in their study that the time spent assisting other students with their reading also benefited the older students by listening to younger students reading and checking for errors so appropriate prompts could be provided.

Findings Shared with Parents

Introduction

To provide further insights and some verification of the students' responses the researcher decided to share the results of the focus group interviews with one set of Maori parents. The researcher shared the semi-structured interview questions and the students' responses with the parents on a one-to-one basis and then asked them if they would like to make any comments. The responses were taped and transcribed. These

parents were selected because they still had children going to the school selected for the study and they had experience at three different schools within the region so they were able to make some comparisons between schools. This sharing of information shows some of the wider implications of the findings of this study.

Reading as a Life Skill

The parents were very aware of the importance of learning to read. The father saw reading as a skill needed to survive in today's society:

You need reading for future references. If you are given important papers when you get older it is important to understand and get a full understanding of it. You need to know what it says in writing that you are trying to understand.

The mother saw the importance of reading as a life long skill needed for ongoing learning:

It helps you clarify a lot of things as well not just to learn what you are reading about but to understand and give advice. The more you read the more you learn and later on when people ask you for advice and you know you have read it from somewhere you can give out good advice.

Parents' previous experiences at school can affect the way they feel about school especially if these experiences have been less favourable. The mother held a very positive view of her schooling and the success she had experienced in reading at school:

I was a scholar. I was reading novels by the time I was nine.

However the father's experiences were not so positive. As a weaker reader he had relied on picture cues and textual visual cues so that he could make a guess about the words meaning:

I was not that good. I had trouble spelling, understanding. I was more or less like my youngest son. I had to see the picture to understand what the words were saying and what was going on in the book. Without pictures in the book I would have been dumbfounded. I wouldn't have understood it at all. I had help and all that. I had one to one and a pairing sort of thing.

These parents were keen for their children to learn to read competently and to be successful in life:

We want our kids to move on in life. We want them to be literate, to be able to read, write and understand.

Both parents reported that they read to their children and from all accounts this was a positive experience for both parent and child. The mother who had experienced more success at school reported:

They love it. Like I do it in a different language, not in a different language but I pretend I'm a Pom or I've got an accent and I make it interesting and they're like, "Can you do it again, do it again."

The father also tried to make the reading experience with his children interesting:

Some of the stories I really emphasise so it puts them in the story and they really get a buzz out of it. Then you look at them and they are really smiling.

There is a library within walking distance from the parent's home and the researcher was interested to learn if these parents used this facility or if they had taken their children to the Library. The father said:

No, we've never taken them to the library but they come back with a lot of books from the school library. They are books that they choose to read whereas when it comes to their home work and stuff the books are chosen for them. Some they are interested in and some they don't have interest in

The Mother added the following:

I've just never gone to the Library. I did it myself in school. No I've never been there and never taken the time out to take the children there. Now you've brought it up we will actually go and do it.

Home School Partnership.

Some of the difficulties in establishing partnerships between home and school are revealed in the following quote by one of the parents:

I do believe there is a partnership but a lot comes down to the inexperience of my kids and when I ask them to do their homework and it comes to reading they just don't want to do it. Down right just don't want to do it and when I ask them why they say they can't do it and I believe it's through pure laziness because they don't want to take the time to understand the words. With H at the moment he has to listen to a tape to learn to read now. That's where he is at the moment and no matter how we tried to sit with him and focus on his reading he didn't want to, whereas with the other children they know that is what we have to do every afternoon and they just whip through. It's not just one story but then they go to get another one.

When the parents were asked about the differences they faced between your eldest child and the two younger ones they suggested the following:

A lot is about growing up. When we had H. we didn't know. We didn't have parenting skills. We were first time parents and we did not know how to sit and do homework with our children. We had a lot going on in our lives and we didn't bother doing it with him but with the two younger ones our focus is mainly at home rather than elsewhere and what needs to be done to help them.

Their child was involved in the Resource Teacher of Literacy programme for one year but as far as the parents were concerned this intervention had not been beneficial. They appeared to be making comparisons between the Resource Teacher of Literacy programme and the Tape assisted programme that their son is now involved in at Intermediate School. They made these comments:

Nuh, it didn't help because of what programme he is on now. He's on this programme where he brings a tape home every night with earphones. He's got to sit there listen to the tape and follow with his finger. He's got to try to read the book by himself. Then after he's done that he's got to listen to the tape again and then he's got to read it to us. Then from there he's got to go back to school and read it to the teacher without listening to the tape. He's got this piece of paper that's got the story there and its got missing bits and he's got to fit in the missing bits.

Their judgements regarding the two programmes may have indicated their lack of understanding and involvement regarding the Resource Teacher of Literacy programme whereas with the Tape assisted programme they knew exactly what their child was expected to do and how they could help in this learning process.

When the parents were asked what they knew about their children's reading programmes at school they felt that they knew very little. When they had been in the classes on previous occasions they were acutely aware of what their own children were doing and if they were misbehaving the parents were not able to concentrate on what the teacher was doing when teaching the group. They felt that they wanted to be more involved and considered the following to be the best way to approach the situation:

No, I think just popping in for starters and asking the teacher if you could sit in for a bit while they read. We have done that a couple of times but when you turn up the kids have a tendency to misbehave because you are there, so to stop disrupting their day you don't go. I think another scenario is that when you do pop in you get your child to be in a totally different group and to be sort of hidden away so they can't see you. Then they will take their mind off you and knuckle down while you are reading with the other children.

Mum added this comment

Even when I was going to do parent help I was not going to do it in my children's class because they would get distracted and it would be "Mummy this and Mummy that" and not focus on what they have to do.

Awareness of Reading Levels

Discussion centred round reading at age appropriate reading levels. The children who took part in the focus group interviews did not seem to realise that they were reading below their chronological ages. These parents felt that it was important for children to know the reading level they were working at and what they needed to do to improve. They doubted whether their son would have known his current reading age but felt that he was aware that many other children in his class were better readers than he was:

In my opinion I don't think so. He would make comments that he can't read as good as the other kids. I think he was aware that he wasn't up there with everyone else. He was behind in a lot of things which made him feel down on himself. It was not just reading it was writing. It was everything basically.

When asked about whether the current school had communicated with the family about their son's level of achievement in reading they felt that they had been given an honest assessment of his reading ability:

Yes, because the teacher and I communicated quite a lot. She always told me. They're straight out; tell you how it is, honest. The teachers there are really involved with one another and are on the same wave length. Basically they are there for your children.

This contrasted markedly from the previous school where they felt they were not told truthfully at what level their child was working at.:

Every time we would go there and ask how things were going they'd say he's doing good, he's reading well, he's writing well but when it come down to it and we moved schools and brought him up here he was very below average for his age.

They indicated that if they had realised how far behind their son was they would have done something about it:

We would have knuckled down more with his reading, helped him get up there more. I felt that the teacher that was telling us that he was doing fine and he was doing good at reading, didn't know. They weren't doing the reading with him, they were just hearing from other teachers. There was a lack of communication and they were going off hearsay. Teachers didn't have time for you they were so busy thinking about all the things they have to do. They just tell you he's doing well so they don't have to talk to you. We feel angry. They say he's doing well and then when we get to the new school we find he's well behind. We didn't know what was a good school and what was not but now we seen the difference.

A child and a family's first introduction to a school is vitally important as this lays the foundation to a family's ongoing relationship with the school. These parents were well aware of the way the classrooms operated and the differences this made to their child and to how they viewed the school. Mum described her encounters:

His first teacher was placid and kind and he got on well with her but then we changed schools and the next one was stern and horrible. She was always yelling and bellowing at the kids. She was vocal and rude the way she spoke to us.

Developing strong home-school partnerships should underpin teacher practice and if schools and home can work in constructive partnerships then children's achievement can be enhanced.

Chapter 5

Discussion of Results

Introduction

The results of this study were reported in the previous chapter under headings relating to the research question and will be discussed under the same headings. In addition, unexpected findings will be discussed under a separate heading.

The research results that follow must be viewed with caution because of the nature of the study. The sample size was small, only eight students, and their selection was not random. These students were chosen because they were performing below their chronological ages in reading. These students were selected from only one Decile 4 school in the wider Tai Tokerau region and seven out of the eight students identified as Maori. However the size and make up of this cohort should not undermine these students' particular insights and what they have shared is both valuable and interesting. It was not envisaged that these results would be generalised to other populations. The goal was to look in-depth into the topic. Krueger & Casey, (2000) suggest the concept of transferability instead of generalisability. That means when a person wants to use these results he or she should think about whether these findings can transfer to another environment. The suggestion is they should consider the methods, procedures and audience and then decide to the degree to which the results fit the situation they face. The results were shared with only one group of Maori parents, whereas it may have been more valuable to share this information with all the student's parents so that all their viewpoints could have been heard.

Literacy Achievement

The group of eight students consisted of five boys and three girls selected from four classes, of year five and six students at the school. All but one student identified as Maori according to the school's entry information. As mentioned above these students were initially chosen by their teachers because they were working below their expected levels in reading but were considered to be able to articulate their views in a group situation. This academic information about their current levels was then

confirmed by the researcher who administered the Burt word reading test (Gilmore, Croft, & Reid, 1981) and a STAR test (Elley, 2000). On reflection it may have been valuable to add information from AsTTle, (Ministry of Education, 2003a).

The students ranged in ages from 9.9 years for one of the year five students to 12.00 years for the oldest year six student. Their Burt word recognition scores ranged from 7.03-7.09 to 11.11-12.05. The student who was the oldest in the group at twelve years at the time of testing, scored a Burt reading age of 11.11-12.05 yet on his STAR test he achieved a stanine two which indicates he was decoding at an appropriate age but achieving at a lower age level in other aspects of reading. The STAR testing results ranged from stanine one to four. One student achieved a stanine of one, three students scored stanine two, two students scored stanine three, and two students scored stanine four. One of the students who scored a stanine four had a Burt score indicating that she was decoding at 9.06-10.00 which was still below her chronological age of 10.11. Not all reading assessment relay similar information therefore it is important to know the strengths and limitations of assessment techniques. The use of a variety of assessment techniques by the teachers and the researcher indicated that these students were indeed working below their expected levels in reading.

Reading as a Life Skill

The findings from this area confirmed that some of the children were aware of the functional relevance of reading. They saw proficiency at reading as a skill necessary in all facets of life. A comment expressed by one of the participants clearly showed that he viewed the necessity of learning to read for his future success in life:

If I couldn't read I probably wouldn't get a job and I would be poor.

It has been maintained by Smith and Elley, (1997) that reading is a key generic skill which often determines how far children will proceed with their education and how well they can adapt to the changing job requirements. The parents also saw reading as a necessary life skill that was needed in today's society for ongoing learning. Without sound literacy skills children may find their chances of finding fulfilling employment exceedingly slim. However other students still saw reading as a set of skills to be

mastered. They mentioned sounding out words or breaking them up into syllables and had not realised knowing or not knowing how to read would affect their future.

Home School Partnerships

The building of constructive home school partnerships has shown that this is an effective way of supporting students' learning. The Ministry of Education, (2005a) school strategy document suggests that parents want to be involved in their children's education and they are able to do this if they get useful information and support from schools to help their children's learning and development. The parents who were interviewed definitely wanted to be part of their child's learning but at times did not know what to do or how they could help.

The increasing diversity among children in New Zealand schools is now more evident. In Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, 50 percent of the children now come from homes and backgrounds other than western European Pakeha and this will rise significantly in the future. At the school where the research was undertaken there had been an increase in the number of children identifying as Maori attending the school. This has risen in the last four years from 33 per cent to 41 per cent. Seven out of the eight children who took part in the research identified as Maori and all reported strong support from their parents and whanau in the acquisition of reading skills. This support involved children reading to their parents, parents reading to their children or parents or whanau helping their tamariki (children) with the mechanics or reading. The asking and responding to questions appears to be a principal aspect of parent-child interactions about text. The frequency and manner of responding to children's questions is therefore an important parental influence on early reading ability (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003).

This partnership can be further encouraged by schools and teachers enquiring about the literacy practices of student's families and communities in order to plan for their literacy programmes (McNaughton, 2002). Conversations with parents and other partners in each student's learning will add to the teachers' store of information about the student and help build a fuller picture of that student as a literacy learner. Parents and caregivers also have expectations. They expect their children to be taught, to learn

and to build on the progress that they have previously made. It is important that the teacher provides the parents with information to help them clarify their expectations for their children's learning and to use as a basis for developing shared goals for them (Ministry of Education, 2006). According to the parents of one of the participants, a teacher at a previous school had given a distorted view when discussing their son's progress at school and it was not until there was a change in schools that they realised how far behind his peers he actually was.

Schools and teachers may underestimate the level of parents' or caregivers commitment to their child's education. This is particularly so with the parents or caregivers of older students because they are often less visible in the school than when their children were younger. Parents and caregivers on their part, may assume that the literacy activities of the home are not relevant at school or that they themselves cannot contribute to their child's literacy learning. This may have been the situation when the parents were voicing their opinion about the extra tuition their son received from the Resource teacher of literacy programme. Perhaps in this situation the Resource teacher could have been more proactive by seeking the support of the whanau (Ministry of Education, 2006). The learning that happened in these one to one sessions with the teacher could have been reinforced at home.

Partnerships between home and school and between the schools and the community are most likely to be effective when they are based on a shared expectation that the student will succeed as a learner. These expectations need to be appropriate and informed so that shared goals can be developed. Teachers have a role in clarifying and sharing these expectations that they have set for their students' learning and communicating these to families and whanau (Ministry of Education, 2006). Effective programmes as described by Biddulph, Biddulph et al (2003) are those programmes that empower the parents by adding to their repertoire of strategies rather than undermining them. Those processes of these programmes respect the dignity and cultural value of the parents. The participants in this research were all working below their chronological ages in reading yet it did not appear that parental or whanau support had been sought to help to remedy this problem.

Classroom Management and Teacher Feedback

Findings related to the research question indicated that the students were not aware of what level they were working at in reading and what they needed to do to improve. It appeared that the children understood the fundamentals of the teacher taking a running record but were not shown how this information applied to their learning. Research by Alton-Lee, (2003) suggests that shared control of learning through student participation improves their knowledge. This sharing of assessment information by the teachers with their students' could have provided a way to affirm and make explicit to them what they could do to alleviate their reading problems. It may have enabled the students to set individual goals and then they would be more motivated when they saw the evidence of their progress.

The partnership between teacher and student is probably more important than any other in contributing to improved outcomes for the student. Teachers need to work in close partnership with all who have a stake in the students' learning. Partnerships are collaborative relationships that contribute to and support students' learning. Quality partnerships are built on shared understandings and shared goals for the students' literacy development. The main partnerships that contribute to and support students' learning are: partnerships with professional colleagues which include partnerships for interventions and partnerships for transition and home school partnerships.

Instructional strategies as described by the Ministry of Education, (2006) are the tools of effective practice. They are deliberate acts of teaching that focus learning in order to meet a particular purpose. Instructional strategies are said to be effective only when they impact positively on student learning. The teacher's use of instructional strategies is informed by their knowledge of the learner and of literacy learning. The students talked about the follow up activities they completed as a result of previous learning experiences they had had with the teacher working in a group situation. The children talked positively about doing work sheets and completing thinking strategies templates. The teachers at this school appeared to have a repertoire of instructional graphic organisers to engage their students in text based activities that would enable them to progress in literacy learning.

Information and Communication Technology

Information and communication technology (ICT) such as the internet is rapidly generating new literacies required to effectively utilise their potential (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). These technologies also make possible new instructional practices to help children acquire literacies of the future. The challenge for teachers is to increase their own understanding and awareness so that they can utilise these new and emerging literacy practices and technologies to communicate (Ministry of Education, 2006). Two of the participants in the research project reported favourably that they had used computers, the internet and animation to create their own stories that were then put on the school server for other classes to access. Another two girls had been involved in rewriting popular fictional texts to be shared with the junior classes in the school. Their body language indicated that they felt that this was a worthwhile activity and provided them with a purpose for reading and writing. An ever-increasing amount of current and useful information is presented through electronic media. High interest CD-Roms that have been especially designed to motivate and support underachieving readers and writers help learners to develop and practice reading and writing skills at their own level. These can be used as part of the teacher's balanced reading programme, but these students didn't report that these resources had been used to support their reading.

Personal Reading

The majority of the students stated that they did not enjoy reading in their spare time. All classes at the school have weekly timetabled library times where they visit the school library. Students are allowed to take books home from the library but must ensure they have a bag to put the books in. Some of the participants in the study reported negative experiences of borrowing the school's library books. They were reluctant to take books home because previously they had either lost the books or when Mum was cleaning up she would discard them. Obstacles like not being able to take a book home because there were no plastic bags to put the books in, could easily have been remedied by the teacher having a ready supply in the classroom.

Although some of the students had attended the Public library and there is a branch of the library in the suburb within walking distance of where they lived, not one of them was a member or had borrowed any books or resources. The parents also reported that they did not utilise this free community service.

Most children start school believing they will learn to read. However those who experience difficulty quickly develop a concept of a poor reader and their motivation declines. They read less, both in school and out, than those children who are succeeding. The amount that children read influences further growth in reading (Baker, 2003; Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; Stanovich, 1986). Library use could be encouraged so that the students always had a ready supply of new and exciting books and resources. It would be relatively easy for the classes at this school to make a visit to the library that is situated in their suburb and for information about accessing the library to be included in newsletters that go home to parents.

Longitudinal studies have provided evidence that early interest in reading influences subsequent achievement. Olofson and Niedersoe, (1999) reported that children whose parents said that they showed a very low interest in books and story reading before age five had weak reading skills in Grade 4. This research was supported by Weinberger (1996) who found that children who were experiencing reading difficulties at age seven were less likely to have a favourite book at age three and were read to less frequently by their parents at age five.

Students Reading Aloud

Reading aloud in a group or class situation was not considered a favoured activity by the participants. They appeared to know that this was not an area of strength and a public display of their ability was not in their best interests. The students talked about noticing others getting distracted when they were reading. Other children were concerned that if they got words wrong the other students would laugh at them. These situations could be avoided by the teachers implementing guided reading sessions where students' receive prompting or direct teaching when they are reading or constructing unfamiliar kinds of language. Guided reading as described by the Ministry of Education, (2006) has a central role in leading students towards

independence in reading. It is during these sessions that students often apply or practice reading strategies and skills that have been introduced to them in shared reading.

Teacher Reading to Students

Reading to students from the best of children's literature should be a daily part of every classroom programme from years five to eight (Ministry of Education, 2006). However the way in which the teacher reads is considered important. It has been recommended by the Ministry of Education, (2006) that the teacher should be familiar with the text so that he/she can concentrate on reading fluently and expressively. The participants in this study enjoyed being read to by their teachers. Reading to students frees them up from decoding and supports them in becoming more active in the listening process. Several of the students talked about visualising the author's words and that they were able make connections between what they already knew and the new information they were hearing. In a teaching reading situation, students are able to extend their literacy knowledge and awareness. They can develop new insights into the ways language works, when they are read to in this supportive environment. In the researcher's experience this activity should be included in the daily.

Peer Collaboration

Much of what students learn, and how they learn is bound up with their peer culture. Nuthall, (2001) suggested that students live in a personal and social world as well as in the world of teacher-managed activities and much of the knowledge that students acquire comes from their peers. Often what students learn and how they learn depends on how they interact with other students and their ability in that particular curriculum area. Literacy teaching can be more effective for Maori and Pasifika students if familiar content is incorporated into classroom practices and builds on some of the relevant practices students bring to school (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003). Teachers can build on the Maori concept of tuakana teina relationships and build relationships in the classroom that foster peer collaboration in using and creating texts. In years five to eight peers play an increasing role in their

lives and influence their values attitudes and behaviours. The teacher has a role to play in fostering positive and healthy relationships in the classroom and monitoring the effect of peer pressure on student learning and progress (Ministry of Education, 2006). In a well planned literacy programme, peer groups, buddies and peer tutors can all be part of the network of partners who contribute constructively to student's literacy development. The participants in this study described their enjoyment of working with buddies in another class to help them learn to read. Sometimes teachers underestimate how capable children are at helping one another and supporting their learning.

Unexpected Findings

The New Zealand population as a whole is highly mobile. High mobility rates can bring benefits to a community but they can also have adverse effects, particularly where there is loss of infrastructure and where people are moving for negative reasons (Gilbert, 2005). The school child mobility rate in New Zealand is very high by international standards, with segments of the Maori population being especially mobile (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003). Four of the students who participated in the study had attended three or more schools since the beginning of their primary school education. According to the research conducted by Gilbert, (2005) these students would have been classified as frequent movers. One girl had attended six different schools. Frequent mobility may be detrimental to child outcomes and children who have attended four or more schools by the time they are ten seem to achieve less well than others on some academic and social measures. Gilbert, (2005) suggests that students, who move frequently especially during the school year are regarded negatively by schools. They are seen to disrupt school programmes and routines; to impact negatively on a school's performance; and to create extra administrative work that cannot be budgeted for.

Truancy and frequent absences from school for what ever reason also have a negative impact on students' achievement (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003). When the researcher looked at the E19/22A or progress cards of the students involved in the research it was discovered that half of the students had regular absences throughout their schooling. These ranged from 138 days to 261 days with the medium of 193

days. For these children this would almost have amounted to missing a whole year of schooling. Although the Ministry of Education's Student Management Systems may address some of these concerns and will help to track and keep better records on students as they move around it will not reduce student disruption. To break this pattern will require better communication with parents and caregivers and the importance of maintaining regular attendance at school.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This research was carried out in order to investigate low achieving year five and six students' perceptions about reading and the supports or barriers they faced in reading acquisition. The aim of the research was to hear the voices of the children commenting on their own understanding of the reading process. The researcher wanted to report what children said directly rather than this information being filtered through the teachers' understanding of the process. The findings were then shared with one of the student's parents. This investigation clearly indicated that students are quite capable of expressing their thoughts and the parents provided valuable insights into the relationship they experienced with the schools. The results from the research can be shared with the school's management and teachers as the ideas the students have expressed hold implications of how the school can work better in partnership with the parents. All data were provided by the students and one set of parents. The study revealed a complexity of factors that influenced students' perceptions of how they learned to read.

The study highlights the importance of home school relationships and the central role of the parents and whanau in supporting their children's learning. The students reported numerous examples of support and ongoing help they received from whanau. From the interviews with the children it was apparent that the parents of these children expected them to do well in reading and were prepared to help their children to make this happen. The parents interviewed also had high expectations for their child but were not aware of the role they should play in his learning. When their child first began school they were not informed of what they could be doing to help or even whether they were part of the equation in the education of their child. It has been the researcher's experience as a Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour that this is often true especially with parents who have not had good experiences with education in their past. Parents can sometimes feel defensive when there are suggestions made by the school that their child may need additional help in learning at school and this needs to be managed sensitively so that they do not feel that it is their parenting skills

that are being questioned. Introductory discussions informing parents and caregivers of the programmes operating in the junior syndicate of school and how they are able to help their child are important for all parents at the school. Schools will often purport to having an “open door” policy but parents of diverse learners can feel that this is a door opening only one way. Trusting relationships take time to develop and it can take time for these to begin to grow and home and school begin to support one another. Initial experiences when their child first starts school are crucial for parents who are not comfortable in the school setting. Shared agreements and understandings between teachers, students and parents about what is to be learnt and why is critical because often students, particularly underachievers, do not know what they are supposed to be focussing on and parents are not aware of the help they can provide.

The findings from the research have highlighted the central role the teacher plays in the acquisition of reading skills. The quality of teaching practices is the largest influence on the achievement of students. The students in this study revealed good relationships with their present teachers. Current thinking about learning acknowledges that learners must ultimately be responsible for their own learning. Constructive feedback is recognised as having a powerful influence on student achievement. However responses from the participants indicated that most had not received feedback as to their current levels in reading. They appeared to be unaware that they were working below their chronological ages in reading and what they needed to do to improve. The students’ acknowledged some aspects of teacher feedback regarding their current reading attainment but this was not explicit. They were aware that running records had been administered by their teachers but they were unaware of the purpose and what these tests were measuring. In order for students to learn, they need information about their current levels and what they need to do to improve, so the gap between the two becomes obvious. Learning is about attempting to reduce the gap. As these students were oblivious of their deficits they were unable to goal set and take pride in achieving those set goals.

An association between student achievement in reading including a positive attitude and the practice of reading both at school and home has been presented. Most of the students interviewed did not enjoy reading independently. They found reading difficult and avoided reading in their spare time. This finding is supported by Juel,

(1988) who found that good readers read twice as many words each year as poor readers and by the fourth grade good readers had read approximately 178,000 words compared to only 80,000 for poor readers. For these students who were reluctant readers and had difficulty reading age appropriate material, undertaking reading mileage was difficult. The students reported their enjoyment of reading with a partner and using Information and Communication technology to create their own versions of stories. These are areas that could be explored further which would increase the number of words a student reads and the learning that is embedded in peer and group relationships. Developing positive attitudes and creating an interest in reading are seen as important goals for teachers to achieve. A set time for independent reading during the daily programme is an essential part of the classroom literacy programme. For students to become lifelong readers they need opportunities to select their own texts, read them and share what they have read. The school library or the local library can play an important part in introducing students' to new material.

Seven out of the eight students identified as Maori. This gap between reading achievement of students of diverse backgrounds and mainstream students is of concern as there is increasing diversity of students in New Zealand classrooms. It is important for teachers to understand how they can successfully teach reading to students of diverse backgrounds so that the historical pattern of low progress is not perpetuated. Research evidence about what happens in New Zealand schools has shown that teachers and other staff tend to have lower expectations for certain identified groups of students particularly Maori and Pasifika students. Deficit theorising by teachers as described by Bishop, Berryman et al (2007) can be a major impediment to Maori students' educational achievements. Half of the participant students had attended more than three schools since beginning their primary education and such constant changes can have an impact on learning. A number of the children had high rates of absenteeism and this may have had some effect on how they learnt to read.

The findings of this study support authorising students' perspectives on reading. Their views about learning to read are valuable and can be shared to inform school management. In addition, understanding more about students' perceptions of their learning has important implications for practising classroom teachers. Teachers could

be alerted to the fact that these children were not aware of their current reading levels as this information had not been shared so they were not able to set achievable goals. If the teachers had been able to share this information with the students' parents, there may have been a collaborative effort to rectify this problem. The sharing of the findings with one set of parents was valuable and enlightening and the information they were able to impart confirms that most parents want to help their children to learn but some are confused about what they can do to help. Guidance is needed on the part of the school in this instance. Schools could make a significant difference if they shared with parents research based strategies that they could use at home should their child be experiencing difficulties in learning to read.

Students were indeed capable of providing their views and were perceptive in what supports and barriers they faced in learning to read. Learning and the way students learn is very complex. Learning does not come directly from classroom activities, it comes from the way students experience these activities, how they extract information from the activities and the sense they make from them. The participant students and parents demonstrated that if there is a policy of open and honest communication with the school educators, they are able to express relevant opinions that can inform and assist school policy. To understand what happens during the teaching learning process and to identify the supports and barriers to learning to read, we must consult those who are an integral part of that process and that is by looking at reading through the eyes of the students.

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APPENDIX 1

Information Letter for Principal

Dear _____,

I am requesting your permission to talk with a group of your students about their views of reading and what has helped or hindered their progress in learning to read. This research is part of the requirement for my Masters of Teaching and Learning degree at the Christchurch College of Education. I plan to meet with the group at school at least three times.

The students' information may help me in my work as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour in your school and I may be able to incorporate some ideas that the students have felt have been beneficial to them.

All information will be totally confidential. The student's names will not be used in any report that I write. The meetings will be tape recorded to aid memory recall. Students will be able to have a copy of the interview. All information will be kept in a locked file at my home and I am the only person who will have access to it. It will be retained for up to three years and then destroyed. You may withdraw your permission for this research at your school at any time.

The Christchurch College of Education Ethics committee has reviewed and approved this study. If you are not happy with the way the research is being done you can let me know or contact

The Chairperson

Ethics Clearance Committee

Christchurch College of Education

PO Box 31-065

Christchurch

Thanking you for your cooperation. If you would require further information before making a decision please ring me on 4327 995 or 021 6030230 or email me at Jabell@xtra.co.nz and I will come to visit you and discuss the project with you.

Yours sincerely

Jan Bell

Permission Form from Principal of School

I give/do not give permission for the following students _____ to be interviewed at school during school hours, at times to be arranged to suit the student's timetable. I have read and understood the information pertaining to this study.

If I agree

- I understand that the students who will be interviewed will have given their own permission and will have permission from their parents/caregivers
- I understand that the group will be meeting at school during school time
- I understand that the group interviews will be tape recorded and the students will have access to a copy of the tape.
- I understand that the school or students will not be identified in the report.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, but will notify Jan Bell immediately if this happens.

Name: _____

School: _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 2

Information Letter for SENCO (Special Needs Coordinator)

Dear _____,

I would like to invite you to be part of some focus group interviews that I will be conducting at your school with a group of students about their views of reading. I would like to find out what has helped or hindered their progress in learning to read. This research is part of the requirement for my Masters of Teaching and Learning degree at the Christchurch College of Education.

The students' information may help me in my work as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour in your school and we may be able to incorporate some ideas that the students have felt have been beneficial to them.

All information will be totally confidential. The students' names will not be used in any report that I write. The meetings will be tape recorded to aid memory recall. Students will have access to a copy of the interview. All information will be kept in a locked file at my home and I am the only person who will have access to it. It will be retained for up to three years and then destroyed. You may withdraw from this research project at any time.

The Christchurch College of Education Ethics committee has reviewed and approved this study. If you are not happy with the way the research is being done you can let me know or contact

The Chairperson

Ethics Clearance Committee

Christchurch College of Education

PO Box 31-065

Christchurch

Thanking you for your cooperation. If you would require further information before making a decision please ring me on 4327 995 or 021 6030230 or email me at Jabell@xtra.co.nz and I will come to visit you and discuss the project with you.

Yours sincerely

Jan Bell

Permission Form from SENCO of the School

I agree/do not agree to take part in the reading research study at our school. I have read and understood the information pertaining to this study.

If I agree

- I understand that what I say is confidential and neither the students school or I will be identified in any way in the report
- I understand that the group will be meeting at school during school time at a time and place to suit myself
- I understand that the group interviews will be tape recorded and I will have access to a copy of the tape.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, but will notify Jan Bell immediately if this is happens.

Name: _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 3

Information Letter to Parents

Dear Mr and Mrs,

I am writing to you to request your permission to talk with (name of student) about his/ her views of reading and what has helped or hindered his/her progress in learning to read. I am doing some research as part of the requirement for my Masters of Teaching and Learning degree at the Christchurch College of Education. This research will involve interviewing students in a group situation about their views of reading. I plan to meet with the group at school at least three times. The senior teacher of Years 5 & 6 will also be present at the meetings.

The students will be able to talk about their experiences and this will help the school to plan programmes that better meet their needs. These ideas will also help me as I already work in your school as a Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour and I may be able to plan programmes that the students feel have been beneficial for them.

All information will be totally confidential. The student's names will not be used in any report that I write. The meetings will be tape recorded to aid memory recall. Students will be able to have a copy of the interview. All information will be kept in a locked file at my home and I am the only person who will have access to it. It will be retained for up to three years and then destroyed. You may withdraw your child from the study at any time up to the end of the data collection stage. It would be appreciated if you could inform me of that withdrawal.

The Christchurch College of Education Ethics committee has reviewed and approved this study. If you are not happy with the way the research is being done you can let me know or contact

The Chair, Ethics Clearance Committee ,
Christchurch College of Education
P O Box 31-065, Christchurch

Please give your child the separate information and permission forms (attached) once you have given your permission for them to read and sign. I will arrange a time to visit you to collect the forms or they can be returned to the office at the school.

I appreciate your cooperation in this study. The information the students provide will be used to inform future programmes in the school.

If you would like to talk to me more about this before you make up your mind please ring me on 4327 995 or 021 6030230 or email me at Jabell@xtra.co.nz and I will come to visit you at a time and place that suits you.

Yours sincerely

Janice R Bell

Parent Permission Form for Student to Take Part in Group Interview

I give/do not give permission for (name of student) to take part in a group interview with Jan Bell.

I have read and understood the information received.

If I agree:

- I understand that the group interviews will be tape recorded but s/he will be able to have a copy of the tape.
- I understand that what my child says is confidential and s/he will not be identified in the report.
- I understand that I may withdraw my child from the study at any time, up to the end of the data collection stage but I will make sure Jan Bell is informed of this.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 4

Student Information Form

Dear _____

You are in your last years at Onerahi Primary School and I hope you will be willing to talk to me about how you learnt to read. This will probably include reading at school and home. I would like to know what programmes or approaches have helped you learn to read and what has not been helpful.

What you can tell me will help me when I work with teachers and other students at your school. I may be able to use this information to help other students and teachers from the other schools I work in.

We will meet as a group at school during school time. I will arrange three meetings so that I can gather the very best information you can give me. You can withdraw from these meetings at any time but I would ask you to let me know if this is the case.

I will be using a tape recorder at all of our meetings so that I can make sure I am accurate and do not rely on my memory. I will give you a copy of the tape for your own reference. What you tell me will be confidential. Your real name will not be used in the report that I write. All data will be kept in a file in my home and I am the only person who will have access to it.

The research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Christchurch College of Education. If you are unhappy about anything that happens, please let me know, or you can contact the Chairperson of the Ethical Clearance committee. That address is in your parents' information letter.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope you will be able to help me. If you agree, please sign the form and I will either pick it up from your home or from school.

Yours sincerely

Jan Bell

Student Permission Form Signed by Students Taking Part in Group Interview

I agree/do not agree to take part to take part in the reading research study Jan Bell is doing this year. My parents have also given permission for me to take part in this study. I have read and understood the information in the letter.

If I agree:

- I understand that I will be meeting as part of a group
- I understand that the group interviews will be tape recorded and I will be able to have a copy of the tape.
- I understand that what I say is confidential and I will not be identified in the report.
- I understand that taking part is voluntary and I can withdraw from the study at any time, and my information taken off the data but I will make sure Jan Bell is informed immediately if this is my decision.

Name: _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 5

Parent information form

Dear _____

At the end of 2006 I interviewed a group of eight children from Onerahi School to gather their views on reading. I wanted to know what programmes or approaches had helped them learn to read and what has not been helpful. This research was carried out as a partial requirement for my Masters of Teaching and Learning degree at the Christchurch College of Education. Your child was one of those who took part in the focus group discussions.

These discussions were taped then transcribed and I looked at the big ideas or trends that emerged from the data. This was very interesting and I would like to share these findings with you. I would value your perceptions of how your child learned to read and this would add to the data I have already collected.

All information will be totally confidential. Your name will not be used in any report that I write. The meeting will be tape recorded to aid memory recall. You will be able to have a copy of the interview. All information will be kept in a locked file at my home and I am the only person who will have access to it. It will be retained for up to three years and then destroyed. You may withdraw your permission for this research at your school at any time.

The Christchurch College of Education Ethics committee has reviewed and approved this study. If you are not happy with the way the research is being done you can let me know or contact

The Chairperson

Ethics Clearance Committee

APPENDIX 6

Focus Group 1

Semi –structured focus group interview questions.

What is reading?

What problems would someone face if they could not read?

How do you think you learned to read?

- What has helped you learn to read?
- What hasn't been helpful

How much do you like reading at school?

How good are you at reading?

How good does your teacher think you are at reading?

- Does your teacher tell you what you are good at in reading?
- Does your teacher tell you how to improve?

How good do your Mum and dad think you are at reading?

Have you ever received additional help with your reading?

- What happened?
- Was it helpful?

APPENDIX 7

Focus Group 2

Classroom Reading

How often do you read to others at school ?

How do you feel about reading aloud in a group?

How do you feel about reading aloud in front of the class?

Are you in a reading group?

When you work with a teacher in a group what do you do?

What do you do when the other children are working with the teacher?

Do you discuss what you are reading with others?

What did you find most helpful in making you a better reader?

How do you feel about books and stories you read as part of your reading programme?

If you are not using journals or books what other material does your teacher use?

How do you feel when your teacher reads aloud to you?

Do you have SSR? If so what do you do during that time?

If you could choose a reading response what would it be?

How do you feel about worksheets?

Has your teacher ever used reading tapes?

Have you read using a DVD?

What do you think about poetry?

Do you ever do plays as part of your reading programme?

APPENDIX 8

Focus Group 3

Reading experiences at home

How much do you like reading in your own time-not at school?

What do you read?

When do you read?

Have you got any favourite books of your own?

- Tell us about them?

Do your Mum and Dad read?

What do they like to read?

Do they ever read to you?

Do you read to anyone else in your family?

How do you feel about getting a book for a present?

Do you like to go to the school library?

What do you do when you go to the school library?

What books do you choose?

How do you know what is a good book?

Do you take books home from the school library?

Do you belong to the Public Library?